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IS MOMENTUM ENOUGH? THE STATE OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY TODAY

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As the depressing message of the 1990 National Jewish Population Study becomes clear, there is little doubt that American Jewry will enter a period of reassessment, at least in its public discussions if not in its public and private behavior. To advance that discussion we need to have a proper understanding of how American Jewry works.

From Non-Halakhic to Antinomian: An Unrestricted Mix of Lifestyles

It is trite to say that the American Jewish community is a unique experiment in Jewish history. It represents the first ever effort to build and maintain a major Jewish community not only non-halakhic, but antinomian, that has no way of establishing generally accepted law or norms. It is a community full of many contradictions as it maintains different ways of life and lifestyles, from rigidly ultra-Orthodox to neo-pagan. Indeed, most of the community's new institutions that have developed in recent years are deliberately non-judgmental and welcome almost the entire range, if not the entire range, of American Jewish expression as a matter of policy and conviction.

In pondering how such a community holds itself together even minimally I have come to the conclusion that it does so through its momentum -- a centrifugal force, if you will. In the past, the whirring around of Jewish activities created a sufficient gravitational field to keep most Jews from flying off into space. Although occasionally some do through new institutional arrangements (Ethical Culture in the late nineteenth century, Jews for Jesus in the late twentieth), lacking a

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new commitment, most held fast. This is no longer the case. Now individuals spin off because the momentum at the edges has slowed and no longer creates a sufficient gravitational field, especially in face of the gravitational attracton of other larger bodies. It is well to remember that the United States was founded on models of Newtonian physics more than 200 years ago and has sought to build a social perpetual motion machine that will keep the country in orbit even though it is populated by imperfect people in an imperfect world. American Jewry seems to have implicitly adopted perpetual motion as its method for remaining in orbit. Were it to become static, there is reason to believe that things would fall apart. As its "pull" decreases, they are.

Order Amidst the Institutional Chaos

In earlier works such as Community and Polity I have tried to present as systematic as possible a picture of the structure and functioning of the American Jewish community. The virtue of that approach lies in the effort to identify the patterns of order within a system that, to the proverbial man from Mars, looks chaotic from the outside. American Jewry has established a certain order amidst the chaos. There are framing institutions and there is functional specialization along with the endemic institutional rivalries and overlapping.

The American Jewish community continues to function in five spheres: religious-congregational, educational-cultural, community relations, communal-welfare, and Israel-overseas. As the world in general grows more intertwined and interdependent, so, too, does the Jewish community, not only linking these spheres but intertwining them. The former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Tip O'Neill, is famous for noting that "all politics is local." The same may be said of the American Jewish community: All community is local. Even the so-called "national organizations" are essentially local congeries of interacting leaders in places like New York and, increasingly, Washington.

The two pillars of Jewish communal life, the synagogues and the federation, once served very distinct spheres although for a while the synagogues tried to expand beyond the religious-congregational and educational-cultural spheres but failed to do so. Then the federations tried to expand beyond the communal-welfare and the Israel-overseas spheres with somewhat greater success, particularly in the community relations and educational-cultural spheres. Most recently, links between federations and synagogues have also grown. In the end, the synagogues have the "troops" and the federations the "bucks," thus making each particularly powerful and in need of each other. When they combine into a united front as they do in some communities, the result is as close to unchallengable as is possible in a voluntary community.

A decade ago that might have been the end of the story. The community relations organizations were in general decline. The federations were becoming even more comprehensive in their reach while the synagogues had survived a difficult period to emerge as the only place where substantial numbers of Jews gathered on a regular basis (although Jewish attendance at worship services is far below the U.S. national average).

Winners and Losers of the 1980s

During the 1980s, however, many changes took place. The federations ran into difficulties. Federated giving, a product of Progressive era efforts to gain greater efficiency through better organization, lost some of its attractiveness in an age of radical individualism. More and more individual contributors wanted to be involved in "hands-on" giving, that is to say, to support programs and projects of their own choosing and even involvement. The crises that plagued Israel and reduced its luster in the eyes of the world -- including diaspora Jews -- further weakened the federations. By the end of the decade

the federations were in serious trouble.

The reawakening of anti-Semitism in its various guises stimulated a revival of the community relations organizations although only after a redistribution of power among the major national ones. The American Jewish Committee was plagued by internal problems that cost its preeminence, while the American Jewish Congress revived somewhat by the wise mobilization of good leadership and successful public relations. The ADL, with its emphasis on fighting anti-Semitism, gained further support, while the NJCRAC was successful in holding fast to its liberal agenda.

In this connection in particular, new-style organizations emerged such as AIPAC as a grass-roots organization and the Simon Wiesenthal Center as a no-holds-barred fighter against anti-Semitism. While AIPAC drew its support from the establishment, including the federation leadership as well as beyond, the Wiesenthal Center was a maverick from the first, rejecting the existing communal frameworks and striking out on its own.

A parallel phenomenon took place in the educational-cultural sphere with the institutionalization of CAJE - the Conference on Alternatives in (now Advancement of) Jewish Education. What began as an annual countercultural "happening" in Jewish education became the major association of professional and semi-professional Jewish educators with the largest reach and the most extensive program dealing directly with teaching of any Jewish educational body. Subsequently, the old American Association for Jewish Education was reorganized as the Jewish Educational Service of North America (JESNA) which undertook a series of new efforts to promote Jewish education.

The new-style organizations dominated much of the cutting edge of American Jewish activity, though in fact, after the 1960s, every sphere produced its new-style organization. In the religious-congregational sphere, the Havurot also became more institutionalized in the 1980s. In the communal-welfare sphere, several large new private foundations with $100 million or more in endowments became important players.

Two points can be made about this phenomenon. One, the most successful activities were "happenings," perhaps increasingly institutionalized but happenings nonetheless. Just as so many new-style Americans rejected steady long-term activity, Jewish institutions began to adapt themselves to periodic pseudo-spontaneous mobilizing events. (The Soviet Jewry campaign with its emphasis on demonstrations is another example of this.) The second thing is that these new institutions simply added themselves to the matrix of American Jewish communal life and were absorbed to a greater or lesser degree accordingly.

Impact of Soviet Jewish Emigration

At the end of the decade came an external event that could not have been predicted, the release of Soviet Jewry and the mass emigration of Soviet Jews first to the United States and then even more massively to Israel. The institutional impact of this emigration was far-reaching. Israel once again became a central object of veneration in its original capacity as a haven for Jewish refugees. Soviet Jewish immigration was the perfect Jewish cause -- humanitarian and non-partisan -- above the political divisions that had dominated world Jewry in the 1980s, many of which centered around Israel and the peace process.

The massive amounts of money required to do the job reanimated the framing institutions of American Jewry. It soon became clear that only the federation movement and its fundraising arm, the UJA, could even hope to cope with the task. Consequently the vast majority of active American Jews renewed their support for raising massive funds through the federation framework for that purpose. On the other hand, the well-nigh single-minded turn of the federation movement meant that the other organizations, while perhaps reduced in their capacity to reach out to

new funds, inherited an even greater role in keeping the rest of the community's myriad activities alive to whatever degree possible.

Who is a Jew in America?

While all this was happening, the demographic base on which the American Jewish communal edifice rested was undergoing various upheavals. The explosive rise in the intermarriage rate beginning in the late 1960s meant that the endogamous character of the Jewish community and its resulting "tribal" characteristics were severely undercut. The traditional separations between Jews and Christians in matters of family and private life drastically diminished. The preliminary results of the 1990 National Jewish Population Study indicated the results -- 8.2 million people were identified as living in Jewish households. Of them, only 5.4 million considered themselves Jewish. Some 625,000 identified themselves as having once been Jewish but now were something else, while 2.2 million had always been non-Jews. The demographic balance as a result of intermarriage was clearly on the debit side: 185,000 "conversions" to Judaism versus 210,000 conversions out. Seven hundred thousand children under the age of eighteen with at least one born-Jewish parent are being raised as Christians, between 35 and 40 percent of all Jewish-parentage children in that age group.

What happens to a community whose institutions are based on the implicit assumption that their membership is exclusively Jewish when such a change takes place? Of all the Jewish institutions and organizations, only the American Jewish Committee had confronted this problem in a serious way before the 1970s. The accommodation that it adopted provided that non-Jewish members of families where the Jewish member had joined the Committee were also eligible for membership.

In the 1970s and 1980s, even the synagogues, particularly the Reform synagogues, had to find accomodations as well. Efforts were made to accommodate this new trend with provisions, sometimes elaborate, for including non-Jewish members who were spouses or children of Jews, sometimes with substantial limitations on office-holding and participation in synagogue honors, sometimes with very few. The phenomenon of synagogue committees for strengthening Jewish living headed by non-Jews ceased to even draw much attention by the end of the 1980s, despite the patent absurdity of such situations. Federations and other Jewish organizations that did not have the religious problem still tried to ignore these issues which stood to transform the community in the 1990s.

A Liberal Fixation

Equally explosive were the changes in the status of women and non-heterosexuals in Jewish life. Except for the 10 percent of American Jewry affiliated with Orthodoxy, equal rights and status for women in all aspects of Jewish life became a formal requirement throughout the Jewish world and increasingly became the practice as well. Institutionally, the change presented few, if any, problems. Religiously, it widened the gulf between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews.

The treatment of non-heterosexuals is a more complex problem with less impact on the institutional life of the community but more on its religious life. In a way it became a litmus test for the dominant liberal ideology of American Jewry. Reform and Reconstructionism moved ahead with the ultra-liberal agenda. Conservatives tried to avoid the issue. Orthodoxy had no problems remaining committed to tradition.

Above and beyond all else, American Jewry maintained its dominant liberal ideology, despite the arguments of some that the world had changed and more selective thought was needed -- that not everything labelled "liberal" was indeed that or was a Jewish issue. While Jews led the neo-conservative movement in the United States and there were a growing number of Jewish conservatives, while Orthodoxy grew stronger in intensity if not necessarily in

numbers, while Jewish Republicans became a more familiar phenomenon; some two-thirds or more of American Jewry remained true to their liberal faith as reflected in their voting behavior, in the positions taken by the Jewish community relations organizations (who even accepted quotas for blacks by other names), by the near-orthodoxy of opinion among American Jews with regard to issues such as abortion rights.

To some extent this fixation on traditional liberalism added its share to the growing gap between Israeli and American Jewry. Israeli Jews were far less prone to take what had become the espoused position of American liberals on many world issues and even on more conventional ones such as religion and state. The gap between American Jewry and other diaspora Jewries was perhaps less great but even there many of the canons of American Jewish liberalism were not even on the agendas of other Jewries. This was particularly true in matters relating to the centrality of Israel and issues of religion and state, including "Who is a Jew?".

The gap between Israel and American Jewry indeed was one of the predominant features of the 1980s. The Likud victory in 1981, which assured that party and its allies the dominant role in Israeli politics for the following decade, widened the gap of ideas between the Israelis and American Jewish leaders. The gap became pronounced in the wake of the Lebanon War the year after. It continued through the Persian Gulf crisis of 1990-1991 when American Jewry both held its breath for Israel and carefully avoided going there, to the intense discomfiture of Israelis. While the differences of opinion regarding the peace process between Israelis and American Jews have diminished as a result of the Gulf crisis, much has to be done to rebuild that relationship.

The end of the decade saw a certain shift away from these separations toward a more common Jewish agenda. As Soviet Jews began to flock to Israel, the "Who is a Jew?" issue generated by intermarriage became an Israeli one as well. The Gulf War caused those American Jewish leaders who had been angry at the hard line toward the peace process taken by Prime Minister Shamir to begin to reevaluate their positions. Many concluded that he was right to take such a firm position and came around to his support.

Declining American Dominance

In that connection, whatever demographic growth that seems to have taken place in American Jewry between 1970 and 1990 seems to be as a result of immigration from the USSR, Iran, Latin America and, of course, Israel. Otherwise, in terms of natural increase, American Jews are a declining population. As a result, American Jewry's position in the world has also begun to decline, although that decline may not yet have been recognized. Immediately after World War II when there were already approximately 6,000,000 Jews in the United States, Israel had a mere 600,000, a ratio of 10:1 in favor of U.S. Jewry. By 1960 Israel had close to 2,000,000 Jews, while the American Jewish population was still hovering around the 6,000,000 mark. The ratio had declined to 3:1. By 1990 the American 6,000,000 was matched by 4,000,000 Jews in Israel for a ratio of 3:2. If the Soviet aliya materializes as expected, Israel is likely to become the largest Jewish community in the world by the turn of the century.

Moreover, the revival of Jewish life in Eastern Europe and the increasing political and economic integration of the European continent is likely to lead to the formation of a bloc of perhaps 2,500,000 Jews on that continent by the year 2000, even after the massive Soviet Jewish emigration, a far cry from the fragmented and demoralized Jewish communities of the immediate postwar period, many of which were behind the Iron Curtain and could not express their Jewishness in any case. Thus the era of American Jewish dominance in the diaspora and as special counterweight vis-a-vis Israel may well be coming to an end.

U.S. Jewry's Lasting Contributions

This does not mean that the American Jewish community is doomed or will cease to be creative. Again, we return to the question of momentum. American Jewry has made an enormous contribution through its openness and receptivity to innovation and experiment. With all that is tawdry and vulgar, Jewishly ignorant, non-observant and assimilationist in American Jewish life, there is also so much that represents the peaks of Jewish self-expression -- religious, intellectual, cultural, social, communal, and organizational. There is no reason to believe that this creative momentum will diminish in the foreseeable future. But, like the United States itself, it will be less isolationist, less self-contained, more involved in the larger world and more subject to the influences of Jewries outside of its borders.

We started by defining the American experiment as the effort to actualize the laws of Newtonian physics in civil society. Even Newtonian physics, however, rested on fixed natural laws. Today American Jewry, like the upper middle class American world which it most reflects, is moving towards a specific social understanding of the newer Einsteinian physics based on relativity. The results are models whereby relativity becomes relativism. Whether Newtonian perpetual motion is sufficient to contain Einsteinian relativism has yet to be seen.

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