

JEWISH POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Promoting Ethnic Identity and Group Survival

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Jewish political activism, an essential element in the Jewish community relations enterprise, is, for many American Jews, the embodiment of Jewishness. Therefore, Jewish community relations agencies, as well as other Jewish institutions, should tap into that reservoir of Jewishness to involve Jews in political activities that they find meaningful as Jews. To broaden the base of Jews involved in Jewish political affairs, the roles of lay leaders and the Jewish political agenda must both be expanded.

The survival of the Jewish community in America depends upon two very different but related concerns: the "external" problem of surviving as a minority within American society—survival from anti-Semitism or other forms of discrimination—and the "internal" challenge of maintaining Jewish identity and continuity in an open society—survival from assimilation. Community relations agencies, which historically have served to ensure external survival, have often overlooked their potential for mobilizing the uninvolved or underinvolved and strengthening Jewish identity as well.

Most Jewish communal professionals and lay leaders regard community relations organizations as a necessary precaution, guarding Jewish security and promoting Jewish causes outside the Jewish community. The *raison d'être* of these organizations, it is generally believed, is to ensure Jewish survival in the face of external forces in a potentially hostile world. However, rarely are these organizations seen as vehicles for building and enhancing Jewish identity, ideals widely acknowledged as critical to a different type of Jewish survival; that is, surmounting assimilation and group disintegration in America. This article suggests that Jewish political activism, an essential element in the Jewish community relations enterprise, promotes Jewish identity and

ought to be used more extensively to increase the participation of Jews in Jewish communal activity. Such nonpartisan political participation, under Jewish communal auspices, can provide avenues for Jews to be involved in what they consider to be Jewish activities while serving the interests of the Jewish community. Acknowledging the role such activism can play in enhancing Jewish identity is important not only for the field of Jewish community relations but also for many facets of the broader Jewish communal enterprise.

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN JEWISH IDENTITY

Recent findings from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey confirm research conducted during the 1980s that showed that most American Jews are not currently affiliated, do not volunteer time for Jewish causes, and are not ritually observant. Although there has been debate about whether the American Jewish community is "at risk" or whether it has "come of age," both the pessimists and optimists agree that fundamental changes have altered the nature of how Jewishness is expressed (Cohen & Liebman, 1987). The disagreement among analysts is not about the fact of these changes themselves but about assessing the meaning of these changes for

the future viability of Judaism in America. Thus, Cohen and Liebman (1987) both acknowledge that, although religious activity has declined among American Jews, other modes of expression have evolved. They disagree as to whether the erosion of traditional forms of Jewish behavior can, in some measure, be compensated for by the evolution of new modes of expression.

One such transformation is the elevation of politics and political activity as a form of Jewish behavior. Steven M. Cohen has written elsewhere that many American Jews regard politics as a central element in their Jewishness.

For many American Jews, politics—in particular pro-Israel and liberal activity—has come to constitute their principal working definition of Jewishness. In this sense, modern Jewish political movements have served as functional alternatives to conventional religion (Cohen, 1983, p. 32).

Most American Jews continue to be concerned about issues of Jewish security, especially about anti-Semitism in the United States and support for Israel. However, Jewish political activity does not confine itself simply to those areas that are essential to Jewish survival. What then explains Jewish political “hyperactivity?” (Raab, 1991).

COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL EQUALITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE AND JEWISH IDENTITY

As Earl Raab (1991) points out, Jewish political “hyperactivity” encompasses volunteering for political candidates, contributing to political campaigns, and general involvement in community affairs, including cultural, economic, and “cause” associations. The tendency of Jews to participate in such activities may be partially attributable to their overriding commitment to social justice and social equality.

Data from several sources confirm that American Jews consider commitment to

social equality or social justice to be important elements of their Jewish identity. A 1988 *Los Angeles Times* survey asked, “As a Jew, which of the following qualities do you consider most important to your Jewish identity?” Of the three options given, 54% chose “a commitment to social equality,” 16% chose “support for Israel,” and 15% chose “religious observance.” Similarly, recent research by Steven M. Cohen (1991) indicates that 14% of American Jews believe that working for social justice is “essential” to being a good Jew, and another 46% believe it “desirable” to being a good Jew. In Cohen’s survey “working for social justice causes” ranked above other desirable items, including belonging to Jewish organizations, contributing to Jewish philanthropies, and contributing to nonsectarian philanthropies. Cohen’s data also show that many Jews consider supporting social justice causes as important ideals to convey to their children: it is important to more Jews than are the ideals of marrying other Jews, having Jewish friends, caring about Israel, and practicing Jewish rituals.

Clearly, individuals may attribute different meanings to the terms “social justice” and “social equality.” However, we can relate each of these terms to societal values that are consistent with the interests of Jews in America. Both terms denote the ability to have equal access to opportunity—to be free from all forms of discrimination. Commitment to these values in America has been essential to the success of Jews as individuals and the emergence of Jews as an important political force in American life. In addition, American Jews often associate these values with prophetic ideals and see them as inextricably linked to American values, as well as to their Jewish heritage.

One of the primary areas in which the ideals of social equality and social justice operate is the political arena. Therefore, the tendency of Jews to be politically active may be a consequence of a deep commitment to these (Jewish) ideals. This supports Cohen’s assertion that political activity is,

for many American Jews, the embodiment of Jewishness and illustrates how it is possible for Jews to see such activity as part of their Jewish identity.

POLITICAL ACTIVISM AS A "JEWISH EXPERIENCE"

Jewish tradition instructs us: *na'aseh v'nishma*, we will *do* and (then) we will listen (or understand). The traditional path for Jewish "activism"—following religious prescriptions—has been virtually abandoned by the vast majority of American Jews. The tradition's frame of reference, of course, is *halachic*: doing involves observing God's commandments.

In the absence of an almost universally agreed-upon blueprint for doing and a shared religious identity, what sort of Jewish experiences are possible? How shall we define Jewish experiences? What does being Jewish mean? Peter Medding (1987) proposes that American Jews have moved from being a community of belief, governed by an all-encompassing system of laws and practices, to a community of shared identity, in which feelings of ethnic belonging (which are in part a result of being a minority in a majority Christian society) are dominant.

Jewish ethnicity in the community of shared identity is . . . firmly imprinted in the core of personality. It exists very much in the present rather than in a "nostalgic allegiance" to the past. It is difficult to erase or escape even when the individual consciously seeks to do so. Jewish ethnicity, therefore, may remain significant without requiring the individual constantly to raise it to the level of behavior. In fact, in order to *be* Jewish one does not need to *do* anything. Thus, when the ethnic individual *does* something—when he consciously relates to it in one of many possible ways within the whole religious, national, and cultural complex of available options—he further reaffirms and reinforces fundamental values and connects directly with core elements of personal and group identity (Medding, 1987, p. 29).

Medding's observation not only explains why Jews continue to "feel" Jewish even though they exhibit no distinctively "Jewish" behavior but also suggests that Jews who are actively engaged in behaviors that they consider "Jewish" are reinforcing their individual and group identity. Thus, not only is American Jewish political activism consistent with the ascribed values Jews share but it also links Jews with one another, reinforcing their individual and group identities.

Jewish political activism is an avenue through which some Jews can pursue their social justice concerns, and it provides opportunities to enlist Jews on behalf of Jewish (and other) causes while enhancing their Jewish identity. Jewish involvement in such activities contributes to their in-group behavior, thereby strengthening the Jewish community, while advancing Jewish group interests and promoting the public good. In this sense, the Jewish community relations enterprise not only protects Jews from anti-Semitism but also provides opportunities for Jews to *act* in concert with other Jews, in accordance with their Jewish values.

BROADENING THE BASE

The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey indicates that, overall, Jews tend to volunteer more for non-Jewish than for Jewish causes. Thus, although many Jews volunteer, most do not volunteer for Jewish organizations. Since political activism may be one of the principal unifying activities for American Jews, greater emphasis on the potential of community relations agencies for leadership development and for volunteer opportunities could result in increasing opportunities for Jews to be involved in political activities under Jewish auspices. Although the primary mission of community relations agencies—protecting the Jews—cannot be compromised, a secondary goal, nurturing Jewish identity, can be addressed more effectively.

Increased involvement within Jewish

organizations of those whom we might call "political" Jews is not meant to compete with or replace the involvements Jews have in general political causes: such activities are important in themselves, both for the individual and for group interests. In fact, research has shown that volunteering for Jewish causes is linked with volunteering for non-Jewish causes and vice versa (Berger, 1991; York & Lazerwitz, 1987). Therefore, providing Jews with opportunities to be politically active under Jewish auspices is both likely to reinforce their existing political activities and to promote such involvements where none currently exist.

Two issues need to be addressed in attempting to broaden the base of Jews involved in Jewish political affairs: (1) the roles of Jewish community relations professionals and (2) expanding the focus of the Jewish political agenda.

Over the past two decades the field of community relations has become highly professionalized, which, combined with the openness to Jews in American society, has enabled great strides to be made in intergroup relations. Despite many successes, this increased professionalism (which exists at all levels of Jewish communal service) has often resulted in less lay involvement. Whereas many agencies used to rely on "influential" lay leaders to exercise political clout, today many of the relationships are between professionals, who have assumed the role of "players" while lay leaders have often been demoted from "players" to "supporters" or even "observers." Despite the substantial growth of the Jewish communal enterprise as a whole and the community relations enterprise in particular since 1970, it is likely that little if any significant growth has occurred in volunteer opportunities for Jews.

The role that Jewish professionals have assumed as players does not have to be relinquished. However, professionals need to be alert to opportunities for involving lay leaders who have influence and for developing and cultivating influential leaders for the future. Confining Jewish influ-

ence to an elite cadre of professional players is certainly not in the best interests of the community. The task of broadening the base depends upon a commitment on the part of professionals to share the role they have assumed as players while being attentive to their roles as educators, facilitators, and managers—cultivating new leaders and creatively enlisting enthusiastic volunteers.

Perhaps of necessity the mainstream of the Jewish community and its community relations agencies have tended to focus their political activity narrowly on Israel and Soviet Jewry during the last 20 years. As a result, Jews and Jewish organizations have often focused their attention on the national government and have been less involved with other areas of concern that are more local in nature. Although the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC) *Joint Program Plan* contains statements regarding a wide range of issues confronting Jews in the United States, with the exception of anti-Semitism, most of these issues receive little attention on a local level.

As a practical political matter, the focus of activity needs to be broadened to include local as well as national political activity. Because of successes on Israel's behalf (due in no small part to the efforts of AIPAC, the American-Israel Political Action Committee) and successes on behalf of Soviet Jewry (due, again, to the efforts of the Council of Jewish Federations and Soviet Jewry groups), many Jewish organizations have often overlooked the adage that "all politics is local." This became clear to AIPAC, other national organizations, and local leaders when efforts to promote the Palestinian cause emerged in various state Democratic conventions and in local referenda.

Increasing political involvement on a local level requires enlisting more diverse elements within the Jewish community in public affairs activities. Similarly, we need to broaden the agenda to include issues other than Israel and Soviet Jewry. Although

these issues will remain critical, Jewish political activity that focuses exclusively on them can result in a distorted image of Jewish attitudes, which isolates Jews from other Americans—including potential political allies—and thereby limits Jewish impact even on these most critical issues.

In addition, a narrow political agenda limits the potential involvement of Jews for whom Israel may be important but not central in their Jewish identity and of those who are not mobilized to action on behalf of Soviet Jewry. A recent survey of Jewish contributors in nine communities nationwide illustrates the importance of broadening the Jewish political agenda (Raab & Sternberg, 1991). The study shows that, among Jews who are givers to Jewish federations, 8 out of 10 feel close to American Jews, 8 out of 10 feel close to other Americans, but only 4 out of 10 feel close to the Israeli people.

Although this finding should concern those involved in strengthening relationships between American and Israeli Jews, it also suggests that Jews feel a sense of responsibility to other Americans. More than half of those interviewed indicated that the Jewish community should be *more active* in fighting poverty, improving the environment, helping the homeless, reducing crime, improving schools, protecting church-state separation, increasing child care facilities, improving health care, and improving black-Jewish relations. The responses of Jewish leaders—those who had served on federation boards or Jewish community relations councils—did not differ significantly from the overall results (Raab & Sternberg, 1991).

Broadening the agenda can assist Jewish community relations professionals in attracting more leaders and volunteers into involvement on behalf of the Jewish community, thereby increasing Jewish political activity and promoting Jewish interests.

RECONSIDERING AGENCY ROLES

Given the importance of Jewish identity in all facets of the Jewish communal field, it

is time to reconsider the role that diverse agencies can play in nurturing the identities of a variety of Jews. Those engaged in Jewish community relations have an opportunity to nurture Jewish identity while also potentially increasing their roles as advocates. Many Jewish community relations councils (JCRCs) can follow the lead of some that have moved beyond serving as umbrellas for established organizations, establishing areas of consensus, and coordinating community-wide efforts. Together with the national Jewish community relations organizations, they can intensify efforts to create new committees within their ranks to address neglected concerns. For instance, several years ago the JCRC of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin, and Sonoma Counties created a Committee on Nuclear Disarmament, which was primarily concerned with community education and was formed under the leadership of a lay person. Forming new committees would permit the JCRCs to have control of the direction of these initiatives while cultivating new volunteer and leadership opportunities. NJCRAC and JCRCs could also serve as resources for new nonpartisan Jewish political organizations. Just as the Reform and Conservative movements assist newly formed congregations, NJCRAC and JCRCs could stimulate new opportunities for political involvement by assisting those who join together as Jews for nonpartisan political action.

In the midst of declining resources, is it wise to add yet another responsibility for Jewish community relations agencies? The suggestion that we consider nurturing Jewish identity as part and parcel of our work, thereby bringing more Jews into our networks, speaks less to *how much* we do and more to *how* we do it. Because of diminishing resources, which most often lead to cutbacks in personnel without substantial changes in programmatic expectations, professionals will find themselves stretched to do more, rather than less. The emphasis on increased development and utilization of lay leaders is therefore not only desirable insofar as it fosters additional opportuni-

ties for lay leadership involvement but it also addresses what may be a critical shortfall in available professional time. Certainly, leadership development is a time-intensive effort. However, in the long run, the yield both for the agency and the community will increase if professionals invest time in increasing the roles for lay leadership. Such lay participation demands that professionals work to optimize use of lay volunteer time and may require, among other things, that professionals act more as behind-the-scenes facilitators, rather than as up-front political players.

Changing the way in which Jewish community relations organizations are perceived and suggesting that they consider new roles are the most limited ways to interpret what has been presented in this article. The fact that a substantial percentage of Jews consider their Jewish identities to be tied to a commitment to social justice has broad implications for the field of Jewish communal service as a whole. Because this article's point of departure is the role of Jewish community relations organizations, it emphasizes the nonpartisan political domain as a primary arena for acting on these concerns. However, other Jewish institutions, including Jewish Community Centers, synagogues, and women's and men's organizations, can use the political as well as the social domain to provide Jews with opportunities to act on their Jewish concerns.

There is a great deal of evidence that Jews are ready to volunteer for causes that have meaning for them. This article suggests that concerns for social justice and social equality speak to many American Jews and that among those Jews who are already involved there is a sense that the Jewish community should be more active on a range of political and social issues. The Jewish community through its network of organizations needs to be sensitive to these elements of Jewish identity, to "tap into" that reservoir of Jewishness, and to find ways to involve these Jews in activities that

they find meaningful *as Jews*. While cultivating individual Jewish identity, Jewish organizations will also be engaged in activities that promote the public good. That too will assist Jewish community relations agencies in their work.

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