

The Developing Federation Idea*

WILLIAM AVRUNIN

Executive Vice-President, Jewish Welfare Federation of Detroit, Michigan

Two basic characteristics of Jewish Federations are overriding. They affect everything we do or fail to do. They are related to everything I will have to say about Federation. First, Federation is a voluntary association characteristic of our voluntary society; second, it has obvious limitations.

Federation began in most places as an association of service organizations or agencies. It has become an association of individuals, more specifically contributors, and of community service agencies. In some places, it also includes ideological groupings such as the Zionist Organization or the Workmen's Circle as well as the general organizational life of the community.

The association is voluntary. Any Jewish resident can join by becoming a contributor or he can leave by becoming what the campaign organization calls a "turnback." That relieves him of any obligation toward Federation; it does not relieve Federation of responsibility for him.

Any agency can apply for membership in the association or it can threaten to leave the association if it doesn't like the way Federation treats it.

Consciousness of voluntarism by Federation leaders is a major consideration in their decision-making process. It tempers the relationship to contributors and to agencies and it serves as a restraint in exercising the "superior" central wisdom about what contributors should give and how agencies should serve.

The second characteristic is the reality

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of Federation's limitations. We refer not simply to a *sense* of limitations, but to their *actuality*. Even though we use the term "Federation" and "organized Jewish community" interchangeably, they are not interchangeable. Our reference is only to those parts of the organized Jewish community associated together in Federation. In most communities we do not mean synagogues. We do not mean many other bodies on the periphery or outside of the Federation concept. And in a sense, we do not include non-contributors and non-participants.

These limitations are both a strength and a weakness just as they are in our broader democracy. The success of the Federation experience is in dealing with what is, rather than with what ought to be; with crass reality rather than with the idealized image.

There has been an escalating pressure for Federations to engage themselves in areas concerned with the ways Jews ought to live. This is more evident as we become increasingly preoccupied with cultural and philosophical services that include ideological factors. Federations have been cautious about expanding in this direction. It brings us to an area in which Jews are not ready to subordinate their differences — differences that reflect the diversity of American democracy itself.

Often Federations are pressed to finance programs which in the minds of the petitioners the community *ought* to support — even if, in fact the members of the community do not support them. These petitioners are people who fully subscribe to the idea of community re-

sponsibility for Federation as a "money barrel," if not as a responsible deliberative body.

Generally speaking, the Federation limitations exclude religious, political and ideological differences. The other side of that limitation is our insistence that Jews and Jewish organizations are free to express themselves in these fields. This seems obvious, but we are often confronted with righteous demands that Jews or Jewish groups be "excommunicated" because their particular deviation offends someone's definition of "a good Jew."

At the Beginning

Let's look at the origin of the Federation idea! In the two decades between 1880 and 1900, the Jewish population of the United States increased from 250,000 to a million. The early Federations, organized at the turn of the century, financed programs for the immigrant population. They were the most primary of services — relief for families whose husbands had deserted and assistance in locating those husbands, medical services, free loans to assist the impoverished newcomer to buy a store or a horse and wagon. The various organizations, sisterhoods, fraternal bodies and so forth, which joined together to form Federations, delegated to the new central body little more than the responsibility of raising the money centrally.

From those early days we moved forward along with a large part of the *American* community from services to the needy to preventive services and from preventive services to the present emphasis on enrichment programs. We never fully sloughed off the responsibility for the historic purposes — like serving the poor — for which we were founded. Their implementation was made possible by an increasingly middle-class Jewish population with in-

creasingly affluent resources to meet its changing needs.

The same instrument which brought together social services is now appropriately invited to address itself to a grab-bag of cultural services — formal and informal Jewish education, campus programs, camp and Center programs intended to strengthen the identity of our young people as Jews and to reinforce that identity with a foundation of knowledge.

At the very same time, the public image of Federations has changed from a simple association of agencies to something called euphemistically "the organized Jewish community." That's what makes it necessary to remind ourselves of our limitations and of our understanding of voluntary association.

The leaders of an organization that wants to build a school in a new neighborhood do not see any need for consultation with just a fund-raising body like Federation. But, after the building is completed and the school cannot meet its mortgage payments, the same leaders righteously point out that financial support is a responsibility of "the organized Jewish community" like Federation — without limitations.

From Nothing to Everything

In fact, Federation is somewhere in limbo between nothing and everything: from the early primitive association to the organized Jewish community. In every community this varies, depending on its stage of development. Federations may never achieve the ultimate authority of a central organized community though this may be the star to which their destiny is hitched. Even increasing Jewish homogeneity does not have to attain unanimity.

In the 75 or more years of their existence, Federations have demonstrated a kind of flexibility which made them

adaptable to the problems of each era. In the early days the problems of the immigrants were the entire base for the organization of Federations. This was natural because of the fourfold increase in Jewish population from 1880 to 1900, and the average annual immigration of some 90,000 newcomers each year thereafter until World War I. Some of these services to newcomers were refined and professionalized and adapted to the waves of immigration immediately after World War I, and again after World War II.

Shift in Concern

There was a shift in Jewish concern in the Depression of the early 30's when public responsibility for relief developed on the American scene. Jewish agencies moved from poverty to "personal problems," often those associated with being poor. In the very large cities, delinquency was a problem and the Jewish agencies developed high-level skills in this area and in child-care generally. Health services which grew early in the 20th century for the tuberculous and consumptives became a decreasing responsibility for the organized community. These institutions continue outside Federation in some modified manner to this day.

The early settlement houses, addressed entirely to the poor immigrant, became the YMHA's and the Jewish community centers of the 1920's and 30's, dealing with the lower middle class and eventually with the total population.

From the early days, there was always an interest in the aged. The thread of this is continuous with growing and ebbing emphasis on institutional types of care.

Anti-Semitism was an early focal concern of the organized community. It spread in the post-World War I years. It underwent a series of changes in the 30's from a native brand of anti-Semitism to

Nazism, to Arab-motivated anti-Zionism, weaving a matrix of concern for the adaptable community relations agencies financed by the community.

It was in the 1920's that considerable interest grew in central financing of national and overseas agencies and there was a broadening of the Federation into what was called "the Welfare Fund." It is this function with which the Federations identify publicly because of their concern with the inmates of concentration camps and, later, displaced persons camps. The movement from Europe to Israel was followed by the movement from North Africa. In the last several decades the question of absorption of Jewish immigration in Israel became paramount, heightened by the movement of Russian Jewry.

Associated with this was the building of a Jewish homeland. Here the Federations which exercised a sense of limitations found themselves with a problem. The functions they supported were philanthropic and humanitarian. "Building a homeland" lapped over into the political area. While the objectives seemed inseparable, there were clear reasons on the part of strict Federation theoreticians for separating them. Helping the *people* of Israel with humanitarian and educational needs inevitably helped the *State* of Israel. But, it was important to keep the primary objective of Federations clear not only for income tax purposes, but to maintain the continued integrity of the Federation idea as an instrument for serving *people*.

Nature of Association

The two major characteristics of Federation, its voluntary base and its limitations, tend to make it a vulnerable, if not fragile, even a transitory, association. It can easily be weakened, if not destroyed. Just imagine the consequence if the hospital and the Center and the children's

service decided to start their own Federation. It's not so many years ago that such separation was threatened by the major overseas beneficiary (which shall remain nameless) in some communities. Where is the community that doesn't want its Federation to be bigger and stronger? Ironically, bigger is not always stronger.

Let's turn to contributor association. In these days of large and successful campaigns, it is commonplace for two percent of the contributors to give over 65 percent of the total funds raised. What if a handful of major donors . . . ? You can develop the rest of the nightmare for yourself. I can't face it. In this day of million dollar gifts, the potential risks are shattering. And yet, I must add, they're worth it.

But Federations have survived and their stability has been reinforced with the passing of time. Nevertheless, their fragile nature is a source of psychological ulcers to the professional and to lay leadership. They develop a respect for and a stake in the Federation and in its survival which must color their decisions regarding its functioning.

To put it simply, suppose someone suggests a new program for support, or proposes dropping an affiliated service — a hospital or the house of shelter. The Federation is committed to examining that proposal on its merits. But, the top and especially devoted leadership does its examination with bifocals. Beyond the merits, it must evaluate what support of the new program or omission of the old program will do to Federation. Will Federation make friends or lose friends? Will we have a better campaign, attract more leadership? Will the new program enable us to carry out our other functions better?

Thus, awareness of the voluntary nature of Federation and its limitations makes it a deliberative body — one in which changes take place slowly, but, we hope, with deliberate speed. From the

young and the impatient, this brings the Federation considerable abuse. The effort to accommodate them disturbs the leaders who have a stake in institutional continuity. Unfortunately, this sometimes leads to keeping everybody equally unhappy.

The most painful frustration is that of the leadership. The slogan should be, become a leader and lose your clout. Or, if I may paraphrase the way one of my wise *machers* puts it, "to be a leader, you have to be prepared, for the sake of the community, to be nice to people you can't stand!" His language is considerably more picturesque.

Change does take place. There was a time when all Federations supported national TB hospitals. Now, none do. There was a time when no Federations supported day schools. There was a time when community service in most cities meant the traditional health and welfare philanthropies.

Adaptation Possible

With all its limitations, Federations have changed and can adapt to new needs. But, they should not be expected to do so when it means violence to the Federation idea.

Programs directed to the quality of Jewish life, formal and informal, have always had a strong appeal to American Jews. Programs intended to serve this objective have taken a front and center position in recent years. We are learning to adapt the instrument of Federation to them effectively as we have adapted ourselves to other new services. We recognize that our stake in the Federation image is closely associated with providing cultural services. At the turn of the century our forefathers had no such stake. They were not setting out to create what we with forgivable exaggeration refer to as "the organized Jewish community." In Detroit, the United Jewish

Charities was organized by the established 10 percent of the Jewish population to help the 90 percent of recent newcomers from abroad. The objectives were simple and obvious: to eliminate duplication, to increase efficiency, and to raise the level of funding.

The new instrument later was found to be useful in building a Center, housing a Talmud Torah and dealing with the inevitable parade of Jewish problems and programs which the ensuing years brought — first at home, and later nationally and overseas. The problems and programs already described were many and varied, starting with Americanization, free milk, free loans — yes, some free love — and midwives, deserting husbands, hot showers, fresh air.

The ensuing years brought others: diminishing but repeated waves of immigration, economic deprivation, vocational adjustment, family counseling, scholarships, cultural encouragement in music and the arts, health services, discrimination, outright anti-Semitism, Hitlerism, world-wide rescue and rehabilitation, absorption in Israel, strengthening Jewish life at home.

The list is endless. Jews don't run out of problems. Each decade brings its own on top of the residue of the problems left over from previous decades. When the problems receded temporarily, there was an attempt to use the available central instrument for new programs such as: the Jewish student on the campus, higher education in Israel, Centers with cultural programs, improvements in Jewish schools.

Association Develops Personality

In the process, something happened to the central instrumentality itself. It became a platform for Jews to take bitter issue with each other and sometimes to stand together. It became "a place to reason together." Some called it "a

Jewish address"; some wanted it to speak with "a Jewish voice." For others, it was Detroit's and Cleveland's and Chicago's — and, yes, America's, vehicle of kinship with Jews everywhere, in Europe and North Africa and especially in Israel. To all of these, we must apply our modest sense of limitations. The fact does not quite match the label. *But one thing is certain, the instrument of efficiency had taken on a personality and an identity of its own, a life of major importance to Jewish continuity.*

If the founding fathers returned to observe the simple mechanism they had established, they might not like what they saw. They wanted to help the "have-nots"; they had no intention of inviting them into the establishment. In fact, some of their children left the establishment because it reached *beyond* its original philanthropic intention. And some of the children of the "have-nots" refuse to participate in the establishment *because* of the original intention. Why support hospitals and family agencies? Federation is shunned by both extremes; on the one hand, for being "too Jewish," and, on the other, because its founders were not Jewish enough.

Jewish objectives are attained more successfully when they are incidental rather than planful. All the efforts to organize an organic Jewish community, locally and nationally, in America have failed. The Kehillah in New York City in the second decade of the century, and, nationally, the American Jewish Committee in 1906, the American Jewish Congress ten years later, and the American Jewish Conference in the early forties, all sought to become the "address," the "voice," of American Jewry. And, none succeeded.

Established Values and New Programs

The Federation movement cautiously and persistently avoided this objective. It

had other work to do. It financed a network of basic community services which made a measurable contribution to the current social, economic and educational status of American Jews. It developed a sound deliberative process and a system of accountability in the field of human services. It exercised a sense of priority and timing in relation to Jewish life and Jewish problems. Most of all it involved the overwhelming majority of American Jews in a process which serves as an image for Jewish identification.

With all their imperfections and exceptions, these are some of the factors that characterize Federation. They have been a source of strength despite the burden they impose. They have been the guidelines which support the thesis: Better a limited Federation than a broad "money barrel."

Now, from many quarters, the Federation movement is challenged to take on the role and the function of responsible centrality. This requires board representativeness of a different character we are told, including measured quotas of youth, academics, orthodox, women, recipients of service, etc. (No one has yet suggested representation of the non-contributors.) The basic test we must continue to apply first to any candidate is, will his leadership help us carry out our basic function — fund-raising, social, communal and fiscal planning? Is he committed to agencies of high caliber? A

good Federation will develop the kind of structure which will assure the most effective level of communal programs. This is the test which supercedes the quotas of representativeness — without necessarily negating them. Fortunately, a good many women and youths meet these tests. But, we must be cautious that we don't settle for a first-rate central body and second rate programs.

Federation's effectiveness depends on its continuing to function as the planning and financing instrument for agency services, i.e. child care, aged, health, community relations, the enrichment of Jewish life. Its own personality and identity are a plus which assures the Jewish community of the strength to meet today's problems and project tomorrow's programs. It came to us from our predecessors who strengthened it while they used it. We can pass it on enriched only by our understanding of it.

Somehow, it has a practicality *and* a philosophy, or as some have termed it, both *Mitzvah and Torah*, at the same time. The more fully we understand the Federation idea, the more we use it, the more deeply we cherish it. I implore all to treat it with respect and affection, to nourish it with generosity, to adapt it with wisdom, to strengthen it and to pass it on to their children. It is the essential chore of our-characteristically American Jewish heritage as long as we have a feeling of *mishpachah* for each other.