

The Second Agenda*

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EACH of us in the field of Jewish service presumably has two jobs. One involves the particular profession we practice. The other is the Jewish agenda we all have in common—if we can define it.

If we dive immediately into a sea of universalistic rhetoric, then we will have missed any significant definition of that common Jewish job. "Helping people," "doing justice," "building a better world"—those are not just Jewish jobs, they are everybody's job. And, besides, those are not jobs that can be done directly by anyone without some intervening definitions.

Nor will we get a significant definition of the common Jewish job by swimming in particularistic rhetoric. "Ensuring Jewish survival," "enriching Jewish lives," "making better Jews." Those are also forms of reductionism which cannot be advanced without some intervening definitions.

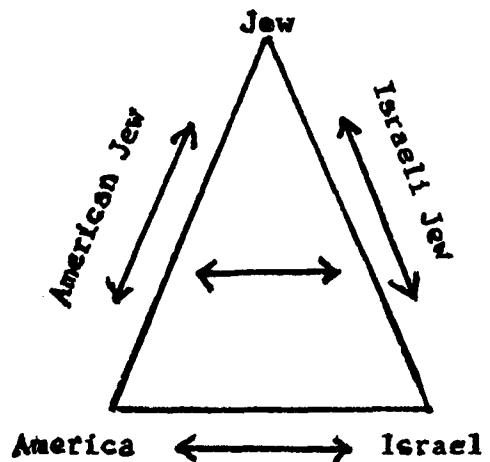
Of course, there is always the possibility that we would be better off just to do our professional jobs well in the reasonable hope that larger Jewish values will thereby be served. Jews do have a tendency to over-define. One of Mort Sahl's early jokes was really a kind of Jewish joke. A bank robber gives a note to the teller, saying "Hand over all your money at once or there

will be trouble" and the teller writes back, "Please define your terms."

Perhaps we can't help ourselves. Zangwill once wrote: "The Jewish mind runs to unity by an instinct as harmonious as the Greek's sense of art. It is always impelled to a synthetic perception of the whole."

However, if we stay away from the grand, reductionist definitions, and look for some working definitions in this time and this place which unify our Jewish functions, the search itself can be useful.

The main body of world Jewry sits astride a unified triangle of relationships at whose apex is the Jew, and at whose base points are Israel and the United States of America.



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In other words, there are four sets of relationships to be examined, four sets of relationships which define the major body of Jewry in the free world. One is the relationship between Jew and America. On that slope lives the American Jew. The second is the relationship between Jew and Israel. On that slope lives the Israeli Jew. The third relationship, across the middle of the triangle, is the relationship between the American Jew and the Israeli Jew. And the fourth relationship, at the base, is between America and Israel.

The security and the identity of the modern Jew depend largely upon the soundness of those three points of the triangle—Jew, Israel and America—and of those four relationships. And within this triangle lies the *tachliss* of the relationship between the “universal” and the “particular” as it affects our lives and our jobs.

One of the more easily understood aspects of that integrated triangle is the interdependence of America and Israel. For the foreseeable future, the survival of Israel depends upon the support of America. And it is clear to many of us that the survival of Israel as an expression of the dwindling association of free, democratic societies is critically important to the U.S.

By the same token, the security of the Jew at the apex depends upon the seamlessness of that triangle. The security of the American Jew, living on the slope between “Jew” and “America,” depends upon the democratic nature of the American society. And in certain practical ways, it depends on the relationship between America and Israel. As an example, the evidence indicates strongly that any serious anti-Semitism in America in the foreseeable future will flow from ruptured relations between Israel and America, rather than the other way around. For that matter, the security of Soviet Jews and

French Jews, also depends heavily on that triangular relationship.

However, in our common agenda, we are not just concerned with the physical security of the Jews, but with the survival of Jews as Jews, with Jewish identity. There is reason to believe that the spiritual identity crisis of Israeli Jews is created by discontinuities between Jewish identity and Israeli identity and will continue until those two identities have been better integrated. That matter has been much discussed. Less discussed is the possibility that the spiritual identity crisis of American Jews is created by discontinuities between Jewish identity and American identity, and will continue unless those two identities are better integrated.

But for American Jews, there is another possible discontinuity. American Jews need also to integrate into their American Jewish identity their relationship to Israel as a place of residence for Israeli Jews, as well as a place of spiritual reference. However, it is possible that they will never be able to do that successfully, until they establish themselves firmly as authentic American Jews, if they can.

To say that is almost to say the unthinkable. The term “authentic American Jew” has evil connotations for those who believe that all Jews either are or should be alien anyplace but in Israel and who believe that the term is redolent of earlier German Jewish delusions about being “authentic Germans.”

But the reality is that most American Jews will remain residentially in America, unless, as the theory goes, American changes character malevolently. And the reality *there* is that, if such a malevolent change takes place, it will be an extremely dangerous future for Israel itself. And therein the line of special relationship between America

and Israel completes the magical triangle.

Some would say that the authenticity of American Jewry might be built around its political responsibility to maintain that bottom line of the magical triangle, the relationship between Israel and America. But, however stimulating the fulfillment of that responsibility has been to Jewish identity in America, it will not indefinitely sustain that identity.

Conversely, some would say that an American-Jewish authenticity is not required (much less possible), but only a *Jewish* authenticity in America. That is, a Jewish authenticity and an American authenticity could exist side by side, not touching, one of the idealistic visions of a pluralistic America. But it won't work, according to most evidence, not in modern structured society. Too often, the two identities, not functionally integrated, are at war. As a result, one or the other is diminished, and it has usually been the Jewish identity. And therein lies the spectre of a pathological and disappearing American Jewish community. The emergence of the State of Israel, mainly, has seemed to replenish the Jewish identity in America. But that identity is destined to become based exclusively on the bottom line of the triangle, and leaves American Jews somewhat uneasy.

One dimension of the uneasiness has to do with what being an American Jew means to American Jews, the relationship between being Jewish and being American.

Perhaps American Jews never fully understood the nature of that relationship, and probably they miscalculated it. It is not that the Jews have achieved a tripartite power status in America. They have not. It is not that they have totally overcome their marginal status in America. They have not.

It is not that they are especially loved by other Americans. They are not. It is not that the possibility of anti-Semitism has been rooted out in America. It has not been. It is not because America has provided a safe and free haven for many Jews, which it has. Most significantly, America has provided a major locus and a major vision of a world society which is consonant with Jewish existence and with Jewish values. The kind of political freedom for which America erratically but uniquely stands—and for which European liberalism never stood—has to do not only with religious freedom in the narrower sense, but provides the only possibility of human and spiritual fulfillment in the modern political world.

And America has provided a vision of a society which can be open to change without being certain of its destination—open to history, open to both the past and the future.

If a common denominator of Jewish identity is an identification with Jewish history, then it necessarily entails a certain Jewish stance toward history itself, toward being active in history and toward history being actionable. Arthur Cohen once posed a fundamental *Jewish* question: "How does my faith enable me to survive not *in spite* of history but *in and through* history?" America may have provided Jews an opportunity to take such a stance, to be active *in* history, and to help shape a human society in which history is actionable.

If all this—or something like it—is true, then we are provided with some guidelines towards the fulfillment of our common Jewish job, our second Jewish agenda.

In general, as far as *our* job as American Jewish agencies is concerned, three of these relationships fall within the purview of our job as American Jewish agencies: one is the relationship between America and Israel, but that is

a job which we are well conscious of and preoccupied with, however well we are doing it. The other two relationships, I would suggest, need a great deal of repair: that between the American Jew and America; and that between the American Jew and the Israeli Jew.

To begin with, what does it mean to be an American Jew, an *authentic American Jew*, beyond being an educated and committed Jew in general? On the surface, it means participating fully and influentially in shaping the nature of American society, or, more explicitly, helping to move the American society in certain desirable directions. Those directions have very much to do with the extension of political and human freedom within the American society itself.

Further than that, it means recognizing America's unique role as the ideological and physical standard-bearer of human freedom in the world, and leader of the free world. It means recognizing the critical importance of that unique American role in the dangerous modern world now beset by an aggressive totalitarianism and an increasingly aggressive Muslim fundamentalism. And it means not just recognition but active support for that American role in the world.

Such a deep involvement in American affairs is a vital *Jewish* job, so much so that it must be a *Jewish community* job. Only such an America can sustain a free and flourishing Jewish life in America. Only such an America can maintain the survival of Israel—and perhaps other sectors of world Jewry—for the foreseeable future.

However, it is not just a matter of Jewish security. It is also a matter of American Jewish authenticity to participate "in and through history." Within the unique locus of America, on behalf of spiritual and political free-

dom, and within the context of Jewish meaning, we can help shape a society and a world in which history is actionable for the better.

The other changing job we have in order to fulfill ourselves and survive as American Jews is to relate strongly and intimately as authentic American Jews with Israel and Israelis. That once seemed easy. We gave financial support, we gave political support, we visited, we *quelled*, we fraternized, we participated to various degrees in Israeli Hebrew culture, the modern-day cultural equivalent of Yiddishkeit.

Partly, it was easy because, over and above our commitment to the security of Israel, a commitment which will never flag, we never had any questions about the nature of Israeli authenticity. But on the triangle's slope between Jew and Israel, there have been emerging some questions, which are fully recognized by Israelis.

Israel has been changing culturally. To put it more concretely, in terms of American Jews, we can less and less easily see Israel as some idealized European Labor Zionist dream come true. Israel is a *real nation*, with its own political and social problems and realities. It is a great nation with a great people, but it is not a summer camp or museum for starry-eyed American Jews. Israel is its own country, and will go its own way.

For one thing, these changes will make it even more difficult for American Jews to base valid American Jewish life primarily on the existence of Israel. On the other hand, of course, neither can an American Jewish existence be contemplated without a special and close relationship to Israel and Israelis, beyond politics and money.

The point is that such a relationship must be based on the realities of Israel, not on a made-in-America vision, and must cut through the bureaucratic cur-

tain which lies between most American Jews and Israeli Jews, as constructed by national and international Jewish agencies with their own special agendas.

In sum, the common Jewish job we all have is to strengthen the structural and seamless nature of this triangle—to do what we can, beyond our immediate jobs, to integrate all these relationships on which depend a durable Jewish identity in America, and more. But what can we do as professionals, as agencies organized as Jewish communities, to accomplish this?

The advanced consciousness of this model of integrated Jewish needs among American Jews is itself important, and will have consequences. But, more specifically, our institutions, the educational agencies, the Centers, the Federation entities, and so forth, should with all deliberateness include all these elements and these relationships in their programs. They should be conscious vehicles of American Jewish authenticity. That is a matter of *educational* import, and it is also a matter of Jewish involvement in common areas of general community action. Such Jewish involvements have been decreasing in recent years.

Our agencies and institutions also need to rethink and make more profound, their activities with respect to Israel and Israelis. We need to be at once more honest and more intimate with respect to Israel. This applies to work projects as well as to educational programs. In these projects, we need to puncture the bureaucratic curtain as much as possible, which means more direct, and more local, contact. Project Renewal could be seen as a move in that direction, although it is too often vulnerable to a lady-bountiful touch. This more direct approach could be extended to other areas.

In order to move in such directions, logic calls for our agencies and institutions themselves to become more cohesive, so that they are not themselves isolated from each other and from that second Jewish agenda. Each community should have an active council of Jewish agencies and institutions whose explicit job is not just administrative arrangements, or mutual show-and-tell, but the development of and the dealing with the larger common Jewish agenda, of which the triangle is one possible model.

Now, such direction and such activity may come hard for agencies and institutions which are hard-pressed for time and energy, and properly have their eyes out for the successful accomplishment of their narrowly mandated functions. But, unless we can mend the functional fragmentation of Jewish institutions, we are not doing our part in preventing the further isolation of Jews from America, Jews from Israel, Jews from Jewish identity. And here is where the leadership role of the professionals can be potent, because we are ourselves often the bureaucratic problem.

There is another hazard: that we will relegate this search for integration to national organizations, headquarters and think-tanks. There is an important stimulating and fructifying role for such, but, unless this effort is vibrant and active at local levels, with local program and local initiative, it will just be lost again in a bureaucratic maze.

After all, this triangle is not just an abstract shape. It is the real, living shape of the Jewish community in the world today, and that which was said Talmudically by a rabbi over sixteen centuries ago is again critically applicable: "The community is Israel's rampart." The reintegration of that community in modern circumstances is our second agenda.

One of the things that triangle tells us is that the particularistic Jew will neither thrive nor survive in the modern world without some active relationship to the world around us. And the nature of that relationship is defined in the triangle. It is somewhat different for American Jews and for Israeli Jews—but, for both of them, in somewhat different ways, the nature of America is vital. And here we are, as

American Jews and American Jewish agencies, at this historic center. This active relationship between America and the Jew is, for us, the practical point at which our particularistic survival and our universalistic mission come together, critically for both. But, at this moment, we are not engaged nearly enough at that point. Indeed, we may be moving away from it.

Twenty-five years ago in this Journal

The tendency on the part of some social group workers to operate on the basis of a set of fictions at variance with the reality of practice has picked up alarming momentum in recent years. It is time for the profession to halt—however momentarily—its search for professional status and to look realistically at its goals, the means of achieving them, and at the community needs that await the attention of the leadership of the field. Problems of volunteer-professional relationships are not new to social work. One only needs to review the records of social work conferences during the first two decades of the Twentieth Century to see that casework underwent a similar struggle. The writings of Mary Richmond have acute relevance to the problem of our time. She indicated her own displeasure at the fact that “some social agencies use volunteers in a very wasteful way, keeping them at clerical tasks when they could easily be made ready for

more responsible work,” and she urged that “the world is not a stage upon which we professional workers are to exercise our talents, while the volunteers do nothing but furnish the gate receipts and an open-mouthed admiration of our performances. Social work is a larger thing than that.”⁵⁰

In a paper given at the National Conference of Charities and Correction in 1907, she further declared:

We hear much about trained paid workers in these days, but the supreme test of a trained worker is the ability to turn to good account the services of the relatively untrained.⁵¹

Let us meet this test with conviction and with the confidence that this is indeed the crucial task of a social group worker.

Daniel Thursz
on: “The Volunteer in Social
Group Work”