

The Myth of Community in the Sunbelt

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The sunbelt communities provide a unique and exciting situation in American Jewish life. They are the only communities that are experiencing any type of dynamic growth. That they do so in a suburban environment and that they are faced with a disproportionate number of retirees add to the complexity of the situation. One must believe that the resources, both human and financial, are available to deal with this situation. Indeed, all of American Jewry must take it as an imperative that sunbelt communities grow into strong, multi-faceted, mature communities.

DURING the past 15 years, a major redistribution of the American Jewish community has taken place. Large numbers of Jews have left the northeast and midwest for the sunbelt: Florida, southern California, Arizona and cities such as Denver and Houston.¹ This population shift holds with it the opportunity to develop major new centers of Jewish life.

The process of creating new sunbelt communities is still in its embryonic stages. The question of the day is whether the process of communal development will ever reach its potential in the sunbelt. Whether the large and important centers of American Jewish life—New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Los Angeles—will be recreated throughout the sunbelt is a matter of more than passing interest to all who are concerned with the survival of American Jewry. Indeed, the next 15 years will tell us if the drastic growth that has occurred in parts of the sunbelt will result in well organized established communities, or whether it will result in much larger populations but mythical communities.

Five South Florida Jewish communities, Miami, Hollywood, Ft. Lauderdale, Boca Raton and West Palm Beach,

located along Florida's "Gold Coast", seem to be typical of newly established sunbelt communities. Looking at these communities in depth, one is able to delineate a number of trends and patterns that will dramatically shape the growth of younger sunbelt communities during the next generation.

The dramatic growth of the sunbelt is, in large measure not due to a new increase of births over deaths. Rather, it is made up of an influx of individuals from the north. Included in this influx is a disproportionate share of retirees and elderly persons. This particular demographic mix has important and serious implications for the sunbelt communities, both in terms of how they develop, as well as if they will ever be able to cope with the needs of the type of populations they are receiving.

By any criterion, the South Florida Jewish communities, and their Federations, are new. Miami, the largest Jewish community in the state of Florida, is the youngest of the big 14 American Federations.² The 11 other Florida Federations were all established between 1935 and 1979, relatively late in the development of the American Jewish community.³ All of these communities have shown substantial growth only during the past 10-15 years.

¹ Mel Bloom, "The Missing \$500,000,000," *Moment Magazine*, March 1981, p. 31.

² Daniel Elazar, *Community and Polity*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1976, p. 31.

³ *Ibid*, p. 43.

The five South Florida communities share certain socio-economic, and demographic factors. All are relatively new, heavily suburban, and all have a disproportionate share of elderly persons. In addition, they do not have the same kind of economic base that most of the established northern communities have.⁴ These factors are vital determinants in how these communities will grow. They will also have a tremendous influence on the type of leadership these communities will produce, as well as on the types of fund-raising campaigns and Federations they will develop. These demographic factors will strongly influence what types of services these communities will be able to provide.

Geographically speaking, the sunbelt community is a suburban, and even an exurban one. Unlike the northern communities that are themselves increasingly suburban, the new sunbelt communities never developed from an urban base (with the possible exception of Miami Beach). Sunbelt residents do not have a shared memory of the old neighborhood, the place of first settlement for the Jewish population. Lacking this shared, collective memory of the old neighborhood, the task of building a sense of community is missing a key ingredient.

The suburban nature, as well as the newness, of the five South Florida communities is having a major impact on their institutions and organizations. When Jewish communal institutions develop in the same neighborhood as their residents, they develop a loyal following. As the Jewish population moves, Jewish communal organizations, with their loyal constituencies, are easily able to move. These are Jewish organiza-

tions that serve one, two and even three generations of Jews. Nascent Jewish organizations in a sunbelt community have no such loyal following. They are developing in an exclusively suburban environment, and cater to a far-flung, mobile Jewish population. Many factors which make for loyalty to an institution are missing.

Another factor shaping the future development of these agencies is the manner in which they were founded. In established northern communities, many of the Federations' constituent agencies actually predate the creation of the parent Federation. In the sunbelt community, nearly all of the constituent organizations were established after the Federation, and often founded by the Federation itself. This fact will have great ramifications with regard to the constituent organizations' leadership patterns, growth, fund-raising ability and programmatic scope. The relationship between the Federation and its constituent organizations will certainly be different from those relationships of a northern Federation and its constituents.

The increasing suburbanization of the Jewish community has not received great attention by Jewish sociologists. This is unfortunate, for it is a predominant factor in the development of sunbelt communities. As Daniel Elazar noted,

The impact of the automobile on American Jewish life has yet to be reckoned with systematically, although virtually every Jewish institution has either adapted to the automotive age or has died as a result of inability to adapt. The automobile more than any other single factor ended the neighborhood life of American Jewry, by making suburbanization possible. . . . Most recently the spread of the new highway technology has enabled many Jews to live so far away from Jewish life that they find it difficult even to send their children to Jewish schools. . . . Jewish institutions find it difficult to maintain programs day in and day out. Instead, Jews gather to-

⁴ Ted Kanner, "Meeting the Challenges of an Evolving Jewish Community," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Fall 1983), p. 4.

gether only periodically, once a week for the more devoted, much less frequently for most, without even the option of having children drop in to the neighborhood community center or adults stop in for a weekly adult-education course.⁵

It is clear that the sunbelt community will have to innovate new programs and institutions to deal with these geographic realities. It is less clear that they will find the proper programs and services.

As noted above, overseeing all of the potential growth of the sunbelt communities will be the Federation. This will call for Federations that are strong, both in terms of organization and leadership. And, it will call for Federations that have disciplined foresight and a well ordered plan.

Federations are vitally dependent on a well qualified, sophisticated and mature leadership. Adding to the urgency is the fact that new Federations, struggling to gain stability, are even more dependent than established Federations on competent leadership. It requires a more innovative and resourceful leadership to create and shape a new entity than to guide an existing one.

One wonders whether factors are conspiring against providing this cadre of potentially qualified leaders for sunbelt communities. Two major questions loom as to whether the sunbelt communities will have the proper leadership; one relates to demographics, the other to identification.⁶ The Jewish population of the sunbelt is heavily weighted with retirees. The potential leadership by retirees is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, will they have

the energy and commitment, in their late years, to attempt from scratch to duplicate their efforts made in the north? Will these people, at a time when they wish to relax and enjoy their "golden years", be equal to the challenge and burden of communal leadership? On the other hand, the sunbelt communities have at their potential disposal a cadre of experienced leaders that have faced most of the problems of a growing community. Perhaps, under these experienced leaders, mistakes of past generations and former communities can be avoided. The answers to these questions are still pending.

The other major question concerning leadership in the sunbelt is that of communal identification. Whether the person be a retiree or not, the question of allegiance and commitment to the new community remains. Committed leadership is drawn from the ranks of those individuals that feel that they have a significant stake in the welfare and health of the community. Will a retiree, living out his remaining years in the sunbelt community, without his children and grandchildren, feel this commitment? Furthermore, will this individual living in a self-centered retirement community, become involved with the larger community? Unique to the sunbelt are retirement developments that provide the full range of services for their residents. It is infrequently that a retired resident of one of these developments needs to go beyond his immediate surroundings for his economic, medical, cultural or social needs. Insofar as giving patterns reflect identification, elderly people favor their dollars supporting Israel. They contributed to the building of their local community up north and, now, wish for their funds to support the Jewish state.

Conversely, younger Jews remain a question mark in terms of leadership.

⁵ *Eleazer, op. cit.*, p. 97.

⁶ For a detailed analysis of Jewish communal leadership today see Eleazer, *Ibid*, p. 90, and Melvin Urofsky, "American Jewish Leadership," *American Jewish History*, Vol. 70, No. 4 (June 1981), p. 416.

The depth of their commitment to the local community is hard to discern. Whether they will shoulder leadership obligations remains unanswered.

When looking at the leadership of the sunbelt Federations, and its agencies, one does not see the intergenerational ties that are so prominent in established communities. While the wide-open nature of communal leadership creates many exciting opportunities and possibilities for new people to get involved, one senses a missing element. Lacking is a sense of tradition of the responsibility and obligations of leadership. The burdens of leadership have not been passed down from parents to children. In a sunbelt community, those that will lead will have had to find their own way. Will a younger person, whose parents do not live in the community and whose children may or may not remain in the newly adopted hometown, feel a commitment for his adopted hometown? These answers will not be known for some time. Without family ties or deeply established professional or business interests, it is not clear whether young people will be able or care to help form this cadre of leaders.

Fueling the potential growth of the sunbelt communities will be the Federations and their annual campaigns. One factor greatly impacting on the Federation and its campaign is the highly mobile nature of the Jewish community. Will the new Federations be able to cope with all the obstacles presented by this mobile population, all the while facing the problems shared by all Federations (i.e. apathy, assimilation)?

It has been observed that a constant during the decade of the 1970s was the highly mobile nature of the Jewish population.⁷ In delineating this popu-

lation shift, a United Jewish Appeal memo states, "given the highly mobile nature of the Jewish community, a system for the centralized maintenance on a current basis of certain standardized and detailed donor profile recorded at the national office can only be helpful".⁸ There can be no argument that this type of data could be extremely helpful. Northern communities however, have been zealously guarding their donor files, fearful of losing the total gift to the new sunbelt community. What is happening, one suspects, is that the donor is falling "between the cracks". Neither the northern nor the sunbelt community is contacting the donor, resulting in a net loss, on the national level, of a significant number of givers.

Compounding this chaos is the fact that the proliferating number of Federation computers are not compatible with one another. Each Federation uses different software, as well as hardware, making an interchange of information, or a detailed analysis of most trends, difficult to achieve.

Statistics aside, the national organizations have been at a loss to suggest to the sunbelt communities how to build strong, vital campaigns. There have been some significant breakthroughs such as UJA and CJF's Population Mobility Project and CJF's Model Cities Program but, no tried and true methods have been identified. Each sunbelt community, often new and unsophisticated, is left to its own devices. Few, if any, sunbelt communities are reaching anywhere near their fund-raising capacity. No community is able to effectively search and find the thousands of newcomers to its area. And no community has been able to find the vehicle to break through in the area of major giving (\$10,000+). What results is a

⁷ Thomas Sarkany, "Philathropic Trends & UJA Giving" 1981, p. 3.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 4.

multitude of missed opportunities.⁹

A few years back, Mel Bloom, Associate Executive Vice President of UJA depicted some of these trends. Zeroing in on one means of measuring campaign strength, per capita giving, he noted,

If Fort Lauderdale's campaign could raise, per capita, what Cleveland's does, then Fort Lauderdale would, in 1979, have had a campaign not of \$2.4 million, but of almost \$14 million. South Broward would have raised \$12.8 million. . . .

Is Cleveland a poor model, because it is so established a community, and so long an "over-achiever?" Then take Denver, until recent years an underachiever which raised \$123 per capita in 1979—considerably less than Cleveland and Detroit, but still 50 percent more than the national average. By Denver's standard, the Fort Lauderdale campaign would have been \$7.4 million, South Broward \$6.8 million and Orange County would have raised \$4.9 million.

The point, obviously, is that there is vast room for growth, for expansion, for improvement of our effort and of our result.¹⁰

These poor giving patterns are indicative of a weak organizational structure and of weak identification on the part of the potential donor. They also reflect the profound difficulty of discovering and integrating tens of thousands of newcomers into a community. Indeed sunbelt communities are often communities of strangers.

The proper planning and provision of services have been an extremely difficult task for the Federations. Only a few years in existence, the Federations are being forced to establish day schools, Jewish educational services, community centers, senior services and nursing homes. And, with regard to the latter, senior services, the planning problem is unusually severe. Inundated with tens of thousands of retirees, sun-

belt Federations grope for ways to help fulfill their Jewish obligations of taking care of the elderly. How they can do it in a short period of time, with relatively meager resources, in the face of continuing government cutbacks, is a situation that often defies a realistic solution. Is the answer to suggest to retirees that they return north, to their city of origin, when they become enfeebled and in need of nursing care? It is a particularly harsh solution to contemplate, yet it does point up the need for dealing with a highly mobile Jewish population on a *national*, not simply on a local basis.

Adding further to the necessity of viewing Federation services on a national, and not simply on a local basis, is the demographic situation in northern communities. With a shrinking population base, and perhaps a shrinking economic one as well, what is the long-term prognosis for the northern Federation and its agencies? Will funds have to flow from the sunbelt to the north during the next 25 years? The American Jewish community can no longer think of itself as a loose association of 200 local communities. Each community, both established and sunbelt, must look at its matrix of needs and services in a national context.

Adding further to the complexity of the provision of services is the question of the quality of Jewish life. Beyond the obligation of providing basic Jewish services (and as noted above, in a suburban and exurban setting with all of the attendant difficulties) is the provision of services that enrich Jewish life. Though the five south Florida communities now form one of the major Jewish communities in the world, a number of institutions are noticeably lacking. Among the 500,000 Jews in south Florida there is not a major Judaica library, nor a single college or institution of higher Jewish education,

⁹ Bloom, *op. cit.*, p. 30f.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 32-34.

nor a non-orthodox scholar, supported by the community, devoting his full time to Jewish scholarship. For the "people of the book", this is an incredible situation. Indeed, one could possibly search the whole of Jewish history and never find a major Jewish community so utterly bereft of Jewish scholarship, Jewish books or *Yiddishkeit*. While only a relative handful of Jews are engaged in Jewish scholarship, or academic and intellectual pursuits in the established northern communities, they provide an important source of creative energy. A small handful of Jewish scholars, students, or *havurot* can truly enrich and energize an entire community. These are all lacking in the sunbelt communities and, as of yet, the Federations have not addressed this issue. Ignoring the quality of Jewish life, they do so at the peril of becoming communities with a structure, but without a soul, or purpose.

The growth and development of sunbelt communities has important national implications. It cannot be viewed as only a local problem. As noted above, the problems confronting these newly emerging communities are complex and often overwhelming. If not out of a sense that all Israel is responsible for one another, then out of a sense of survival, national Jewish organizations must take an active part in the concerns of these communities. If these organizations are to grow significantly, it will be largely because of the sunbelt communities.

National organizations must not only think of gathering expertise in all facets of sunbelt communities, they must also be ready to take action. The national organizations must be ready to step in and offer authoritative advice

in their respective areas of expertise. They might even contemplate stepping in with financial assistance. For example, it would make sense for the Jewish Welfare Board to make available capital funds, on a long-term, low-interest basis, to help sunbelt communities get started with the development of community centers. In the area of Jewish education, there should be readiness to create, in the sunbelt, institutions of higher Jewish learning. In senior services, perhaps the nursing homes of the north, would be ready to take back their city's former residents, possibly with the financial assistance of the sunbelt community. All of these questions are merely intended to raise possibilities for local and national cooperation. Resources on a national scale are too scarce not to maximize their usage. The needs of the local communities are too great and important not to have available all of the resources of the organized American Jewish community.

The sunbelt communities provide a unique and exciting situation in American Jewish life. They are the only communities that are experiencing any type of dynamic growth. That they do so in a suburban environment and that they are faced with a disproportionate number of retirees add to the complexity of the situation. One must believe that the resources, both human and financial, are available to deal with this situation. Indeed, all of American Jewry must take it as an imperative that sunbelt population centers grow into strong, multi-faceted, mature communities. To reject this imperative and not accept the challenge, is to cast serious doubt on the survival of the whole of American Jewry.