

THE JEWISH FEDERATIONS

The First Hundred Years

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The Jewish federation is a unique American invention, although it has deep roots in Jewish tradition. It has evolved from a structure devoted to meeting the social and health needs of American Jews and helping them assimilate into American society to one whose major goal is the strengthening of Jewish identity. In the process, the concept of a continental Jewish community has taken shape.

For all we know, Jews may have accompanied Columbus on his voyages, and most likely, some Jews found their way to the New World during the sixteenth century and the early part of the seventeenth century. Yet, histories of the Jewish community in the United States generally commence with the first communal band of Jewish settlers in what was then New Amsterdam (New York) in 1654. The Governor, Peter Stuyvesant, did not want to receive these guests, but was eventually overruled. And so the first organized Jewish settlement in the United States began.

For almost 250 years, Jewish settlement continued and grew in what became the United States, and Jewish communities established synagogues, burial societies, credit unions, and Hebrew Relief Societies in dozens of cities before there was a single federation. From the start, the Jewish communities promised local governments that they would take care of their own people and that Jews would not become a burden to the community. Soon after the first Jewish federation in the United States was organized and founded in Boston, in 1895, another was organized in Cincinnati, and within several years federations sprung up around the country wherever there were significant Jewish communities.

WHAT IS A JEWISH FEDERATION?

The federation has deep roots in Jewish tradition beginning with the Bible. In some ways, it is similar to the Kehilla, the com-

munal organization that existed in so many places in Europe for centuries. But the federation must ultimately be understood as a unique American invention. It was autonomous and never accepted all the commandments and obligations of the Torah and Jewish tradition. It was also a voluntary creation unlike many of the Kehillot, which were formed by local governments primarily to collect taxes from the Jewish community to support the state. No single article can catalogue all of the services provided by federations or offer a full discourse on its purposes, principles, and by-laws. However, from the limited literature on the federation movement (Bernstein, 1983, 1994; Miller, 1985), one can cull a list of what in different publications are called principal characteristics or values of the Jewish federation.

- *Joint Fund Raising, Allocations, and Central Budgeting:* The idea is deceptively simple. As large Jewish communities began to develop a plethora of Jewish institutions to meet various needs and each one had its own fund-raising campaign, it seemed to be more efficient and successful, aiding a variety of institutions in one appeal and offering donors the opportunity to make one gift. Then the appeal could allocate these funds to its member agencies in some equitable manner, and so the federation could care for its own needs and the needs of the agencies. The idea was so simple and suc-

cessful that it was copied by many communities. Communities did, in fact, raise more money in a single campaign than had previously been raised totally.

The first federations were followed in 1913 by the first Community Chest in the United States in Cleveland, the forerunner of the contemporary United Way.

- *Community Planning:* Although joint fund raising and allocations were very central to the federation, this innovation was almost immediately followed by a desire to plan for the community's needs. Community planning has now become a central part of the federation in the United States and in Canada.
- *Central Services:* Federations soon began to provide direct services that were helpful to the agencies and to the larger Jewish community. These include research, demographic information, statistical reviews of what the federation itself was doing, and some kind of central accounting. Central services can be kept minimal or can be extended to include community relations, government relations, relations with the larger philanthropic community, and the like.
- *Agency Benefits:* Not only did the campaigns provide more financial support to the agencies than they could have received from individual campaigns but they also provided a sense of continuity and a sense that the larger Jewish community felt responsibility for the continuity of the agency. In fact, there are several instances where agencies left the federation community only to disappear.
- *Autonomy:* The autonomy of each federation and of its agencies within the federation was and continues to be safeguarded to this day.
- *Inclusion:* Federations try to include new services and agencies to meet emerging common needs. They aim to be inclusive rather than exclusive, even while trying to come to peace with the reality that no federation can meet every need. Limitation and expansion are twin pillars of the federation concept.
- *Governance:* Federations differ in their governance, but each is accountable to the Jewish community through some kind of elected board of directors or trustees who are ultimately responsible for the operations of the federation.
- *Leadership:* At first, federations were volunteer led, but soon needed to engage paid executive secretaries, financial officers, and other staff. Before long, federations became complex organizations with various departments and skills. Between the 1930s and the 1960s, federations developed a marriage between Jewish communal service and the emerging profession of social work. Federations and Jewish Community Centers (JCCs) vied with each other to see which had hired the largest number of MSW's. Although social work remains a crucial profession in federations, the complexity of federations since the 1960s has forced them to look elsewhere—to law for many endowment directors, to political science, to the rabbinate, and even to those who consider their profession to be "Jewish communal service." All of these fields have contributed outstanding leaders of the federations. Nonetheless, the major policy decisions of the federation are still made by volunteers, citizens of the Jewish community.
- *Council of Jewish Federations and Other National Agencies:* Since its founding in 1932, the Council of Jewish Federations (formerly "and Welfare Funds") has represented the Jewish federations of the United States and Canada in a continental approach. From a simple information clearinghouse, CJF has grown to become an integral part of the federation system. CJF maintains offices in Washington and Jerusalem. The Washington office was the moving force in the block grant that has provided hundreds of millions of dollars in federal support for the resettlement of Jews from the Former Soviet Union. It has also led

the efforts to help federations apply for and receive public support for housing for the elderly.

Since the founding of Israel, the United Jewish Appeal has been a vital partner in the work of federations. Local welfare funds and the United Jewish Appeal merged, locality by locality. Several major federations today have adopted the name "United Jewish Appeal/Federation of _____."

Finally, CJF was instrumental in founding several national agencies serving distinctive functions, such as the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council and the National Foundation for Jewish Culture. National agencies are now part of the concern of local federations.

- *Changes in Services:* Jewish federations are broadly based and therefore tend to be a bit conservative and slow to change. But change is constant. In the early twentieth century, Jewish orphanages were vital institutions; now they have largely disappeared. Residences for the elderly were not known several decades ago; now they are important parts of the services of many large and intermediate-sized federations.
- *Public Social Policy:* Public policy and advocacy (tax-deductible groups avoid the word "lobbying") have become increasingly important to federations and CJF. At this point, fifteen states maintain associations of the federations in their states, focusing on public policy issues in the state capital.
- *Community Chests:* Almost since their inception, community chests, United Ways, and other religious federations have worked closely together. United Ways allocate over 15 million dollars annually to the agencies of the federations. This is but one example of the reality that Jewish federations are concerned with and relate to the larger nonprofit sector.
- *Unity:* Broad representativeness is char-

acteristic of the federation, and almost any constituency group can find representation on its board of directors. Occasionally, a group is seen as so far to the right or left that it is denied membership in the local Jewish federation or community council, but, with rare exceptions, the federation is committed to including every group and unifying on consensus issues.

- *Social Justice; Ethical Values:* The Jewish community in the United States has never been solely concerned with Jewish issues. It has worked at promoting democracy for all, for free immigration, and for a just society. Writers debate how central the social justice agenda should be in the Jewish community, but it is certainly still there.

No institution can guarantee the ethical behavior of every one of its members; federations have noted the importance of individual ethical behavior, but have concentrated on ensuring the institutional behavior of the organization and its accountability to the community of contributors.

- *Concept of Community:* A former leader of CJF has often pointed out that the Jewish religion may be unique in making one of its commandments the obligation to "communalize," to gather in community, to build community. Ultimately, the client of the federation is not the individual Jew in need, but the community itself.
- *Creativity and Excellence:* Almost from the start, Jewish federations tried to demand that the agencies they supported be the finest. Federated agencies pioneered in residential child care, in developing professionalism in family agencies, and in creating a wide array of services for the elderly. Some of the world's finest medical centers and nursing homes are federation agencies.
- *Maximum Feasible Participation:* Long before the above term was a slogan in the U.S. War On Poverty in the 1960s, it was

a principle guiding the Jewish federations—a commitment to plan *with* rather than *for* the members of the community.

- *More Than Survival*: From the beginning, the Jewish federation was interested not merely in the physical needs of individual Jews but also in the development of a quality Jewish community. This aspect of federation philosophy has grown stronger in recent years.
- *Sanctity of Life and the Dignity of Each Person*: These ancient elements of Jewish tradition were incorporated into Jewish federation philosophy and practice and continue to be part of the ethical framework of everything that federations strive to do.

These characteristics are at the heart of what federations do and inform the vast array of services that they provide. This list will enhance our understanding of the history of the Jewish federation in the United States.

HISTORY OF THE JEWISH FEDERATION

Period of Jewish Integration, 1895–1948

The first half-century of the Jewish federation movement in the United States was largely devoted to what might be described as welfare—meeting the health, social, and other needs of individual Jews. Federations expanded in number and in function as they served more people in the growing Jewish population in the United States.

Most services were available to all Americans who wished to partake of them, although they were primarily addressed to the needs and interests of the Jewish community; they were clearly sectarian yet simultaneously universal. It would not be far from the truth to say that the goal of the Jewish federations and Jewish social service agencies during this period was actually *assimilation*, helping Jews integrate into the United States, learning its language, its culture, and its values. That goal was expressed very frankly by the Jewish settle-

ment houses in New York City and in other places and more subtly in other agency services. Nevertheless, the goal was to eliminate barriers to the Jewish understanding of America and to full Jewish participation in the American dream.

Integration of Welfare and Israel, 1948–1967

With the establishment of the modern State of Israel, many elements of the federation changed dramatically. The United Jewish Appeal became a much more important institution nationally. Speakers from Israel were much in demand at major fund-raising functions of the local federations. Gradually communities began to integrate their local welfare funds, which focused on social services in the local area, with the needs of Jews in Israel and other places overseas, and in some cases began to have a joint campaign for these causes. The entire American Jewish community was witnessing a very gradual and yet an inevitable marriage between their two major concerns: providing for the welfare of Jews in the United States and providing aid to Jews in the rest of the world, and most particularly, Israel.

Israel-Centric and Holocaust-Centric Judaism, 1967–1990

The Six-Day War of 1967 was a watershed event for Jews around the world, and particularly in North America. After Israel's dramatic victory, simple pride in the Jewish state became a major foundation of Jewish identity in the United States. Similarly, after the capture and trial of Adolph Eichman in Jerusalem, awareness of the Holocaust grew. In fact, Holocaust awareness became a second pillar of Jewish faith, along with pride in Israel. That movement did not peak until the 1990s with the opening of the National Holocaust Museum in Washington, devoted to education about the Holocaust.

Two other developments also character-

ize this period in the history of the Jewish federations in North America. First, the integration of the local federation and its welfare fund and the United Jewish Appeal was completed. The last and largest community to effect this integration was New York City, which did so only in the mid-1980s.

The second development was a major increase in funds allocated to Jewish education. Federations in varying degrees had always supported Jewish education. Most larger communities had boards or bureaus of Jewish education, and some had colleges or other institutions of higher Jewish education supported by the federations. A very small amount of support from the federation had even been given to specific Jewish educational institutions. But that support was minimal, and most Jews believed that all-day Jewish schools were either somehow un-American or at least not worthy of specific support. This attitude too began to change dramatically after 1967. The year 1969 marked the student "rebellion" at the CJF's General Assembly in Boston, where student activists demanded that federations support Jewish education more directly and more fully. This set off a chain of small and large changes from providing kosher food at General Assembly functions to making direct support of Jewish education the largest single component in local allocations in the federations of North America, now about 25% of federation local allocations.

Emphasis on the Future of Judaism, 1990-Onward

Only in 1995 did the findings of the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) of 1990 begin to show their effects. That summer saw a major increase in the number of young Jews given an opportunity for an extended visitation in Israel, and the number is likely to increase in the next several years. However, immediately after its release in 1990, the NJPS set off a wave of concerned meetings, institutes, and follow-ups. These were stimulated by the shocking

realization to most American Jews that the intermarriage rate of 52% threatened the Jewish future in the United States in the long term and that even concern for Israel and awareness of the Holocaust were not sufficient by themselves to guarantee Jewish continuity and survival.

Since 1990, support has been increased for Jewish education, particularly among those who believe strongly that Jewish education for an extended period of years in an all-day Jewish school is the best insurer of in-marriage; others feel equally strongly that associational correlations—participation in the Hillel Foundation on campus, attendance at a Jewish summer camp, even taking a Jewish studies course while at college—are the most important insurers of Jewish continuity. All of these responses are attempts to answer a fundamental question: Can the Jewish community, which has successfully survived and usually grown in atmospheres of persecution and discrimination, survive in a climate of complete freedom, autonomy, and choice where Jews are welcomed, not only to medical schools and country clubs but also into the bosoms of the families of the larger general community? The answers to this question are being written and will be written in the coming years. By the time of the next National Jewish Population Study, it may even be possible to see whether certain specific programs, such as visitations to Israel, greater support for the Hillel Foundation, and the like, do indeed have some positive effect on continuity. But the attempt to answer the question positively will go on well into the twenty-first century when, most likely, Israel will replace the United States as having the largest Jewish population of any country in the world.

One final characteristic of the current period in the history of the Jewish federations is worthy of mention—the emergence of the awareness of a continental Jewish community. The wealthy Jew in Scarsdale, New York, or Skokie, Illinois, has always been concerned for the poor Jew in the

Bronx or in the South side of Chicago. He or she has always been concerned for the poor oppressed Jew in Russia, Ethiopia, or in Cholon, Israel.

Yet, traditionally, that same Jew had very little concern for the Jew in Albany, Georgia, or Albuquerque, New Mexico. The responsibility for that Jew was thought to rest in her or his own community. However, there has been a sea change in the sense of Jewish community around these continental issues, as manifested by the following recent developments.

- The Jewish community taxed itself for the support of Jews from the Former Soviet Union coming to each community in the United States.
- In the same way, the Jewish community, through its federations, taxed itself to guarantee loans for Jews from the Former Soviet Union coming to Israel in a mini-version of the \$10 billion loan guarantee from the U.S. government to Israel.
- The Jewish federations voted to accept a new governance structure for CJF in which certain decisions made by some kind of super-majority might be binding on the federations, despite their tradition of autonomy.
- The Jewish federations are maintaining a fund for emergency disaster relief to be available to any community that might need it.
- Federations voted to develop a special fund to augment support of the Hillel Foundations in the United States.

Thus, the emergence of the awareness of the continental Jewish community, along with the growing emphases on Jewish education and continuity, are the hallmarks of the current period in the history of the Jewish Federations.

THE FEDERATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Some of the important trends along which

federations are developing are described below.

Federations will continue to initiate methods to strengthen and deepen the nature of Jewish identity in the United States. Two approaches are increasing support for formal Jewish education and strengthening aid to Jewish associational activities. In some cases, federations will deepen their relationships and ties to synagogues, including even the funding of some staff members in particular synagogues.

A rather different trend that also is gathering strength is increased outreach to marginally affiliated Jews and even the intermarried. There is still little hard evidence that these approaches have produced significant results, but the impetus is there to make the attempt.

In the coming decades, there will be continued development of the continental Jewish community based on the efforts that have already been undertaken.

There will continue to be great and growing concern about the fund raising being done by the UJA-federation enterprise. There does not seem to be any indication that the well is running dry. Nonetheless, the concern is a real one for several reasons—the total number of dollars raised in annual campaigns has not grown but shrunk from its all-time high of over \$1.2 billion, and the number of donors is shrinking. Surveys indicate that Jews are as philanthropic as ever, probably the most philanthropic ethnic group except for the Mormons. Yet, Jews are now contributing only about 50% of their philanthropic dollars to Jewish causes, in contrast to about two-thirds before 1970. In the coming years, there will be great emphasis on shoring up and enhancing the capacity of the Jewish federations to reach more contributors and to raise more money.

As has been the case in the general society, there has been a great increase in consciousness among Jewish women about achieving equality of opportunity in the leadership of the Jewish federations. In the

last fifteen years, much progress has been made and most of the large city Jewish federations and national organizations outside the federation have had at least one female president or chief voluntary officer. The same degree of progress has not yet been made on the professional side. There has never been a female chief executive of any large Jewish federation in the United States. One may expect that in the coming decade, some breakthrough will take place in this area.

In spite of occasional strains, the United Jewish Appeal and Council of Jewish Federations, the two giant national Jewish agencies in the United States, have maintained essentially cooperative and helpful relations. But for several reasons there is ferment within the Jewish community, and some change in the way Jews in North America and Jews in Israel relate fiscally and otherwise will probably take place.

Because of the frightening aspects of the 1990 NJPS findings, there is some feeling among a number of lay leaders that a greater percentage of funds should be used for Jewish continuity. Some also feel that as Israel's GNP grows and peace becomes

more secure, there may need to be less of an emphasis on fund raising in the United States for Israel and the Jewish Agency, as opposed to more emphasis on its economic development.

CONCLUSION

One conclusion is fairly certain: The Jewish Federations are one hundred years *young*. The most important and most glorious chapters of the Jewish federation history in the United States are yet to be written. Those of us who will be present in the coming decades to participate in the developments and changes are in for an exciting and fulfilling ride.

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