

RESCUING JEWS AT HOME: FEDERATION CHANGES ITS AGENDA

A View from an Intermediate-Sized Federation

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Federations need to retool to address the greatest failure of the American Jewish community—assimilation. They can localize Judaism by providing coordinating agencies' and synagogues' efforts toward transformational experiences in Jewish homes and neighborhoods and by nurturing locally oriented designated giving. Local and regional think tanks are needed to design and implement new strategies for productive change.

Jews are America's great immigrant success story. America's societal values, based on Jewish-Christian values, were well established before the major influx of Jewish immigration to these shores began 100 years ago. The Pilgrims, after all, saw themselves as a New Israel and sought America as their Promised Land. For Jews fleeing pogroms in the Eastern European pale of settlement and subsequent Nazi crematoria, the promise became fulfilled.

One of many consequences of ghettoized life was that Jews developed a natural affinity for a society and government founded upon biblical ethics and the universal values inherent to the Enlightenment Era. The constitutional guarantees of a new America, which protected all citizens' personal rights and assets in a manner Jews had not experienced before, encouraged Jews to prove themselves in a culture that rewarded merit. In return, America welcomed the contributions of Jews, both individually and collectively. In terms of ethics, values, and concrete achievements, Jewish efforts were at the forefront in shaping many facets of American life—initially through providing goods and supplies, later through the entertainment industry, and ultimately through the professions. Standards set by Jews heightened the level of achievement, innovation, and humanitarian efforts in all major metropolitan areas.

Jewish communal agencies, united by the federation movement, have been exception-

ally influential in delivering a broad range of social, health, and recreational services during the past 100 years, even as the pre-eminent item on the Jewish community's agenda has been overseas needs. Now such stellar achievements have become the backdrop for the greatest dilemma confronting Jews in modern society: Will our grandchildren and their grandchildren identify themselves as being Jewish and be able to interpret the unique heritage they have inherited?

American Jews are an extremely diverse population, reflecting the general society that historically has placed great emphasis on the value of the melting pot. We came from Bialystok and Johannesburg, Moscow and Tel Aviv, and have melted into New Haven, Memphis, Omaha, and Long Beach. We are challenged as intermediate-sized Jewish communities to reconcile this history with a new American paradigm: multiculturalism and striving for tolerance within an environment that fosters independence versus interdependence.

A GRASSROOTS APPROACH

In 1995, it is no longer necessary to build the case that federation and its constellation of communal agencies must retool themselves to address the greatest failures of the American Jewish community and its institutions—assimilation and the lack of Jewish affiliation. At a time when American society is encouraging multiculturalism, the

vast majority of American Jews are ill equipped to transmit the richness of their Jewish heritage. On high-school and college campuses, members of the same race, ethnic, or religious backgrounds coalesce during extracurricular activities to positively promote their culture and remain connected to one another. We Jews, instead, gravitate to other groups that promote tolerance, in contrast to championing our own heritage. While our Jewish demographers document the phenomenon of the unaffiliated, Christian groups offer a positive spin and title their research "church growth studies."

In fact, the mainline liberal Protestant denominations have suffered enormous attrition of their own. The churches that are growing in membership today are overwhelmingly evangelical, Pentecostal, or Mormon. These congregations speak the language of young Americans and reach out to them as individuals. The same approach is evident in effective Jewish outreach, of which the Chabad movement and the *ba'al teshuvah* phenomena are clear examples.

It is time to shed old methods. We need to breathe a new form of life into our programs and re-engineer traditional communal services to meet more Jews on their turf, in their neighborhoods, about their issues. A quantum leap forward is required of federation leadership to localize Judaism through transformational experiences in Jewish homes, neighborhood by neighborhood. Houston's Jewish federation pioneered grassroots community building through its "Reclaim Shabbat" program organized in collaboration with rabbinic leaders. The program was designed to engage the resources of every Jewish agency and synagogue in order to mobilize people to actively celebrate Shabbat. In the year ahead, we in Long Beach intend to adapt this dynamic program to a Southern California milieu. Through new methodologies we can bridge the ideological disputes that often set Jews in opposition to one another. Neighborhood-based Shabbat programs culminating in large Shabbat gatherings in synagogues will promote the central theme

that all Jews "share common ground."

Volunteers need to find their efforts fulfilling and know that their philanthropy accomplishes their goals. We in Long Beach and many other intermediate-sized Jewish communities marvel at our recent achievement of raising unprecedented capital dollars to build Jewish community campuses. Designated giving, for capital campaigns or endowment, speaks a new language to our donors, one that they readily adopt to honor their family name, memorialize a loved one, or fulfill their specific vision. Federations that are prepared to cultivate individual donors' particular philanthropic interests will achieve greater financial security more rapidly. Intermediate-sized federations are most likely to be the first to meet the newest challenge of nurturing and publicizing local Jewish giving in an integrated manner for annual, capital, endowment, and designated gifts. In this way, donors can have more influence by participating in a flexible organization that accommodates both their particular and global philanthropic interests.

MERGERS AND ALLOCATIONS

In this modern era, fewer Americans identify with large institutions, support umbrella giving, or champion the causes of central government. Jews in Southern California in particular are affected by an environment that exaggerates this tendency while nurturing diversity, independence, and choice. At this unique juncture in American politics, there is a shifting away from federalism and central authority to placing more control at the local level. Although state and local governments have a greater capability to understand the nuances and complexities of a particular geographic region, just as do federations, they also have less resources to respond effectively to needs. Thus, it is counter to national trends that the Council of Jewish Federations (CJF) is considering greater centralization of resources by merging with the United Jewish Appeal/United Israel Appeal (UJA/UIA), rather than diverting resources to the front-line local level.

It is unclear whether local federations will embrace the merger of their national agency (CJF) with the UJA/UIA, Israel's historic advocate. The primary motivation for merging the resources of CJF, UJA, and UIA seems to be that such integration will result in greater efficiency and effectiveness, thus paving the way for other Jewish consolidations. Streamlined efforts have worked effectively on the local level as evidenced by Indianapolis integrating its Jewish Family Service and Jewish Community Center into a single institution, resulting in greater accessibility of senior adult and other services. In that regard, a national model of integration could result in positive consolidations of the Jewish defense organizations and others.

Yet, there is also the risk that an integrated CJF, UJA, and UIA will attempt to impose simplistic formulas upon a complex federation system, resulting in greater taxation and increased local alienation from national efforts. An equally devastating result could be mandated formulas for extracting hard-earned annual campaign funds to retool the Jewish Agency, an archaic organization that has historically been an embarrassment to both Diaspora and Israeli Jewry. It is conceivable that some large Eastern and Midwestern Jewish federations, comfortable in their bureaucratic mode, cushioned by endowments, and close to national decision making, could accept greater taxation and mandatory quotas for overseas support.

However, this article is written from the perspective of an intermediate-sized Western federation where fiscal achievement is more challenging and national norms are not applicable. According to statistics of Jewish giving, whereas nationally 35% of Jews give to the federation system, only 21% of Western Jews do so. Patterns of *tzedakah*, as well as rates of intermarriage, synagogue attendance, and religious observance, serve as important indicators of Jewish identity and affiliation. Indicators of positive Jewish identification have clearly been on a dramatic downward slide, one

that has been accelerated at a more devastating rate for West Coast Jewry. From the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (Kosmin et al., 1991), we know that 24% of the total population of "core" Jews reside in the West, the second largest region of Jews after the Northeast. Yet, Jews residing in the West are least likely to live in Jewish neighborhoods, have Jewish friends, to be concerned about anti-Semitism, and to belong to a synagogue; they also are less observant and have the highest rate of intermarriage at 72%.

Just as American Jewish communities have demonstrated unparalleled success in pulling together to rescue and resettle Jewish refugees, we must now face the uncomfortable and unspoken reality that today many American communities with large populations of disconnected Jews are disappearing and in need of rescue.

LOCAL AND REGIONAL THINK TANKS

The federation movement holds a unique place in the American Jewish scene. We do not serve a membership; we serve a community. It is a wider mandate with greater consequences. It demands vision, planning, and calculated risk. Designing our systems to represent self-appointed or perceived constituencies has proven counterproductive. Doing so engenders survival techniques, such as consensus decision making that stifles dissent and creativity and ultimately discourages the aspiration of visionary volunteers and directors.

Local and regional Jewish think tanks are desperately needed to gather research, to sensitize and prepare institutions for internal change, to engage our Jewish public, and to keep them informed and forewarned. In this effort, foundations with Jewish interests can play a crucial role, which is now being recognized as CJF strategically works to bring together the disparate resources of the federations and foundations (Evans, 1993; Tobin, 1993). During an impressive forum sponsored by the Benjamin S. Hornstein Program in Jewish Communal Service at Brandeis University, John

Gardner was quoted as saying, "Wealth is not new; neither is charity. But the idea of using private wealth imaginatively, constructively and systematically to attack the fundamental problems of mankind is new."

Regional think tanks of leaders with vision and risk-taking instincts who are academics, philanthropists, planned giving specialists, and Jewish communal, federation, agency, and synagogue leaders are needed to design and implement new strategies that will nurture productive change. Change can only be accomplished through careful consideration of new rationally designed research that is then molded into strategies in which visionary leaders are prepared to exert their intuition. Our energies must be devoted to harnessing untapped resources that can help preserve Judaism in America.

LIFE-SHAPING EXPERIENCES

Such a challenge can only be met if our federations, agencies, and synagogues ensure that more Jews can engage in life-shaping experiences in their homes, neighborhoods, and institutions. The transforming effect that trips to Israel and participation in Jewish camps and day schools have on young people has been well documented. We literally need to endow every Jewish child with these opportunities. Such experiences can serve as windows into what it means to be a Jew. Concomitantly, we must open doorways through which one can walk as an adult. CLAL, the Wexner Fellowship Program, and the Orthodox-sponsored Aish HaTorah are impressive models that demonstrate success with nurturing the spiritual needs of adults. Federations have the ability to develop Jewish consciousness at the grassroots level. We need more imaginative, effective tools and institutional encouragement to deploy fiscal resources to systematically provide life-shaping experiences for more Jews.

CONCLUSION

For Judaism, an ancient religion and cul-

ture, modernity has meant a level of wholesale change that is almost incomprehensible. Thankfully, we are blessed with the best-educated population in America, replete with analytic skills. In the words of Gerald Bubis (1995) the Jewish masses became "seekers after comfort—psychological and physical, associational and familiar—who wished to learn skills, keep well, entertained, and have their children or parents in a caring and nourishing environment with a vaguely defined Jewish ambiance, (called the JCC)." Thus they sought "Judaism on demand, rather than demanding Judaism."

We must comprehend what has happened to us, deal with it, and mold it into a productive outcome. There is no mystery to the question of how a community of spectacularly high achievers has failed to transmit its heritage in an open society. In the spirit of universalism and liberalism, we were fixated on being inclusive. We wanted to be accepted by the general population. We succeeded. Now, we are looking for different results. One hundred years later, what changes are we federation professional and volunteer leaders prepared to make, personally and communally, to ensure that Jewish resources are used maximally to guarantee that Judaism survives in America?

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