THE END OF COMMUNITY

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Editor's Note: This article, a departure from the usual Journal *fare, paints a bleak picture of the Jewish communal world in the year 2040. Its goal is to provoke, to stimulate thinking about the direction of the Jewish community.*

This interview was the last granted Elias Bard, one month before his death on July 11, 2040, at the age of 117.

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You could say that I was one of the last Jewish communal servants. In the middle and toward the end of the last century, that profession had special significance. But alas, like blacksmiths and coopers in the gilded age of the nineteenth century, they have disappeared. To understand, let me recreate a context—perhaps more—let me recreate a world that is all but forgotten.

During the American industrial period it was common for religious affiliation to serve as the vehicle by which people traveled from the old country to new ways of living. This was the established pattern in the new world and the old. Jews recreated the mutual support societies, organizations, and institutions of the old world in the new one of America. And for a century, the traditional Jewish community grew in dimensions unrealized even by themselves.

Like an adolescent who grows awkwardly, self-consciously, the scale and speed of the Jews' growth were not initially perceptible. The societal forces promoting this growth coalesced in the 1960s. We awoke and saw a new image in our private mirrors, and in the Gentile world's eyes— the image of the Jewish community as a strong, accepted, productive, fully matured, vital part of American life.

The "high-water mark" of this era was 1967. I borrow this phrase from Pickett's charge at Gettysburg a century earlier. On July 3, 1863, that charge heralded in a new era. The South was broken, and the direction of a new national identity and experience was forged and determined. Military historians theorized that the tacticians did not adjust the strategy of a direct frontal attack to the technological breakthrough of the highly accurate smooth-bore rifle. The carnage resulted from a mismatch of technology and strategy. More of this later.

Likewise, the sudden, shocking, apparently pristine victory of the 1967 Six-Day war captured Jewish attention and consciousness and catapulted Jewry onto the world scene. Israel's "finest hour" unleashed American Jewry's largesse and harnessed its quietly building new self-confidence to a new vehicle—the power of Israel.

American Jewish leadership leapt to maximize the new opportunity. Israel, Israel, Israel became the new rallying point. The power and focus of the American Jewish world shifted to enable a massive financial-technological transfer to the Jewish state. The cost, hidden at the time, was that the American domestic and communal agenda was frozen in a pre-1967 form. Even leadership development became outer-directed, based on the trickle-down theory that after touring the Golan with Israel's prime minister, American leadership would mystically return with the urge to build Jewish communal institutions. This alchemy never occurred.

Two other developments smoothed the acceptance of this Israel focus. The first was the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King's dream pushed African-American rights into center stage, accentuating and hard-wiring, with legislative and judicial rulings, the protection of minorities. The liberal social agenda was triumphant. The riots of 1967 solidified those

gains—awakening a recalcitrant public to recognize that the pace of progress was not sufficient, not by half.

The ascension on the public agenda of both individual rights and of rights for minority groups, groups apparently more vulnerable than the Jews, allowed the Jewish community to turn its attention to international affairs, unabated by heightened fears of anti-Semitism.

The year 1967 also was the last year of hope for the Great Society, before the Vietnam War swallowed the nation's energies and innocence. The social legislation of the mid-1960s—Medicaid, Medicare, and the Older Americans Act—promised to relieve local Jewish communities of their historic, traditional burden of caring for their poor, disabled, and aged—further moving American Jewish leadership from domestic issues.

The nurturing and development of local Jewish services were squeezed off by the outflow of energy and funds to Israel. The powerful East Coast city-states of the era used their dominance to act as giant sweeping operations. Orchestrated by sophistication and the sheer critical mass of resources and Jews, the agenda was shaped, articulated, and diffused to the hinterlands. Yet, it might well have been that, even without the Israel push, the organized Jewish community would never have realized these funds. We were a contentious people. The nationalism of Zionism brought the annual campaign to greater heights, above the traditional fractious fray.

In a sense, local community needs were appended to the national campaign. The Israel appeal was so powerful and so unique in its universality that it was the lead product that pulled the other local needs. But, as a result, the local communities receded from public view, losing exposure and by and large the habit of developing and experimenting with products that garnered adherents. And when Israel became a modern complex nation, losing its unabashed, universal appeal, local communities were left with little generative power. Like the land

in the postbellum South, it was sown too often with the same crop, without variation, replenishment, or modern tilling. It just gave out. Perhaps it was preordained.

This pattern pushed undernourished local Jewish organizations toward new nonsectarian payers, donors, and communities. Much of this was by design. Jewish communities reorganized to avail themselves of the governmental largesse of the new programs. To maximize the funding opportunities, communities distributed leadership to their various "enterprises," somewhat like picking up sides as in a knot-hole baseball league—you go to the nursing home board, you to JFS, and I'll go to the JCC. As well, it was an opportunity for more "leadership," more presidents, boards, and, in theory, more involvement. Each board then sought out its specific funding sources.

For a while the system worked. But the promise of the Great Society programs was subverted by the populace. Originally intended for the poor, the programs' genetic codes were manipulated to serve the middle-class, resulting in cancerous runaway growth that threatened the government's economic survival. To save the overall organism, radical therapies were brought to bear. Amputation, surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy were used to excise the most dangerous cells and to arrest, sometimes indiscriminately, all growth. The organism and the programs survived, but in a desiccated form.

The issue then became how local Jewish communal agencies could find their way back to community. Some leaders, who had been involved in the earlier decision to reformat parts of themselves to attract outside funding, remained on the scene throughout the entire cycle. As the government strategy sloughed away, those leaders turned again to the community forum to re-engage. But what they experienced was the new Tower of Babel. Allegiances were temporized, shifted, made more complex by the nuances of different organizations' funding streams and how they fit into their particu-

lar "industry." The constituent parts had taken on the colorings, the rhythm and the vocabulary, the dialect of the underlying societal systems. When they attempted to return to the community status quo, no one could understand each other. The shock was palpable. It was like witnessing a small child trying to speak to a visitor who speaks only a foreign language. The child speaks louder, repeats himself, slows down—all to no avail. Similarly, the Jews came together and could not understand why they couldn't understand. They discussed, argued, debated, cajoled, and maneuvered, but with no engagement—the link was lost. And as in the story of our childhood, families and tribes gathered their possessions and moved away.

Much of this happened in the old regime, before the fall of the city/state/nation and before the amalgam of components of the former United States and Canada into the Great Western Alliance.

Those of us who remember, who speculate on what might have been, used to talk and wonder about the loss of the shared idea—the idea of a sense of peoplehood—and why we lost the ability to cohere.

Some hold to the belief that the federation hobbled its constituent agencies with conscious intent. By making the 50 percent Israel pledge an a priori assumption, little remained for local consumption. Some feel that it was by design—an enormous bait-and-switch tactic all for the protection of the Israeli card. Undernourished agencies were so busy fighting for daily survival that they had residual energy only for tactics, not strategy. Nor did they develop the long-range views and leadership culture that could see the big picture or that could threaten the status quo. In a sense, the ongoing crisis in the present ate the future, or its ability to plan a different future. The paltry, intermittent handouts resulted in rag-tag agencies and synagogues. It was as if it was embarrassing to live Jewishly; peoples' identities drifted, *no,* were projected onto the idealized young, strapping

Israeli soldier-intellectual, 8,000 miles away. People learned to live their Jewishness almost completely vicariously.

But more critically, in the highly mobile society of the late twentieth century, the idea of Jewish community in America had drifted to esoteric, abstract, theoretical themes—we are one, community as family—annual tag lines. It had turned its back on the basic principle of community—living together in a place.

Post-World War II, the upwardly mobile Jews grew and moved with the general American growth. They dispersed geographically from tight urban, to suburban, to exurban living, and their well-educated children became highly mobile in a national economic miracle. These were enormously powerful centrifugal, socio-frugal forces that struck at the bond—physical proximity—that is critical to forming community. Others, for example, Gary Snyder (1993, p. 273) recognized that *place* "is the oldest organizing principle...(it) holds people together long enough to discover their power as citizens in their common inhabiting of a single place...a place develops practices, creates culture." Daniel Kemmis (1993, p. 28) tied it also to the land: "a people must be bound together in ways that enable them to work together. What the project of inhabiting hard country does, above all, is to create these bonds." He pointed out that the word "inhabitation" is quite literally rooted in soil. But the physical agencies, the local buildings and organizations that could bring people together, were allowed to dissipate.

The Israelis well understood the power of bonding to the land. In an immigrant country, among a hybrid people, its cult of archeology "reflected an obsessive search for common roots.... It was not strictly an academic exercise but a tangible means of communion between the people and the land" (Elon, 1984, p. 16).

Ultimately, for American Jews, the organizing power of Jewish values proved to be illusory. Too late, local Jewish communi-

ties found that shared values have power only when they arise out of "the challenge of living well together in hard country" (Kemmis, 1993, p. 283). The problem was accentuated by the dispersion of Jews to ex-urbia and to the West. Ironically, American Jews were encouraged to think of Israel as their hard country, their soil. Without the focus or the resources to build their own local communities, their own shared values, they lost the experience and the ability to create real community. Their sense of community was rooted in an idealized land that they would visit on average twice in their lifetimes. Consequently, Jewishness became a free-floating value, a shared vocabulary, a turn of phrase, a secret handshake that created transient comfort and good will. It devolved to a stylized ritual reserved for festive occasions, to memorialize the fathers, and to pay homage to an idealized land of milk and honey.

But, though the cause and effect, and the consequences, were clear from hindsight, that does not mean that they were equally clear at the time—and for most of us they were not.

By the year 2000, it was clear that the American century was over, and the Asian ascendancy was for real. With the polarization and destabilization of neutral Lebanon, Israel became the new Hong Kong. Or, more accurately, the new Singapore, which in 40 years grew from poverty and illiteracy at its national birth to wealth greater than its founder Great Britain by the mid-1990s—all by investing in the new knowledge infrastructure.

Born into a hostile world, Israel experienced delayed economic growth in its first decades. But by the late 1990s, and as the crossroads for East and West, Israel became a first-world post-industrial power—the economic center of North Africa, the eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East. By the teens, as the loss of American Jewry loomed and the economic tide had turned, Israel initiated Operation American. Like a Marshall plan, Israel's hope was to invest resources into rekindling the once mighty furnace of American Jewry. The embers were still flickering. But it was too late.

My own theory of the end of community has a different orientation. I am less captured by conspiracy theories and the conception of history as created by great decisions and more by the idea that what occurs is a function of how and what we see, the mental maps that people use to share and organize their worlds. The Israel focus was not the main cause. Rather, the real cause of the end of community can be traced to 1971, four years after the American Jewish community's high-water mark, when three young engineers at an unknown California start-up company named Intel invented the microprocessor and changed the world. Adaptation of the chip to personal use over the succeeding half-century radically redistributed knowledge and information from the few to the many, from the central to the periphery. The historic basic organizational and societal command-and-control model was suddenly obsolete.

If it had taken 200 years to build the massive industrial enterprises—huge hierarchical structures with sharp divisions of labor—it took but 50 years for the chip to erode those very foundations. The rationale for the centralized control model was the earlier era's meager ability to distribute information—to train and educate staff and to maintain a continuous real-time flow of information to the many. Consequently, decisions were made by the few at the top.

The chip, the computer, now called the synthetic mind, changed all this. With instantaneous shared information, the need for hierarchy was eliminated; in fact it was a decided disadvantage. Group endeavors survived and blossomed by parallel processing, by engaging everyone's mind at once. The *raison d'etre* of industrial age corporations, nation-states, cities, and organizations by and large, evaporated. The shift was from mass to speed.

It is hard to understand even now why the Jewish communal enterprise could not have shifted to the post-industrial mode. Surely the next generation of Jewry was at

the forefront of this societal revolution. Perhaps the entire communal form was merely a twentieth-century phenomenon, and the significance of "peoplehood" was an anachronism. But I think not. My sense is that the natural and healthy evolution of the central command-and-control mechanism, the federation, was stunted first by the Israel phenomenon, then by organizational inertia, and finally by a lack of imagination. The Jewish community was not torn asunder; it was bleached out.

The quest to hold sacrosanct the Israel-first transfer of funds, even as the local Jewish world withered, constituted, to paraphrase former Premier Ross Perot, a "giant sucking sound" that was cleverly muffled by a small, tightly knit command-and-control structure. This structure controlled, as the British controlled the eighteenth and nineteenth century worlds, through the tactics of divide and conquer. The very structure of colonial governance accentuated the historical schisms and rivalries of the locals. Hostage to their old internecine competitions, they battled fiercely for a share of a diminishing pie, with little residual energy to see the larger picture.

Ironically, the Jewish control mechanism was an intricate, elaborate ritual called "community." It worked like this. In order to obtain community resources for any purpose, the venture required community approval—read as community consensus. For if there were no consensus any disaffected community members might withhold their contribution, which would have a disproportionate impact on the Israel-first agenda. Consequently, to access capital, each new idea would have to run the gauntlet of community approval, a slow, enervating process in which each small interest group, intermittently goaded to resentment and suspicion, effectively held veto power. Eventually, everyone neutralized and then paralyzed each other. With any novel idea threatening the delicate equilibrium, the entire community enterprise slowly faded to death, in lock step.

For a long while, even though the community had lost its ability either to bring its ideas to term or to nurture their development through adolescence, they continued to be spawned. There evolved a new set of Jewish entrepreneurs, a form of Jewish beltway bandits, who positioned themselves to reap these extraordinary ideas and then privately finance and sell them back to the community. Despite the obvious conflicts of interest, those leaders used their insider positions to persuade the community to purchase, not produce the services.

It became ever more difficult to develop and grow new ideas within the communal setting. Creative Jewish communal workers—who had been selected, trained, nurtured, and apprenticed in a centuries' old "laying-on of hands"—also abandoned their positions for outside ventures. Stripped of its extraordinary lay and professional leadership, the Jewish community gave up its self-image as a dynamic enterprise caring for itself for that of a market.

Even after the Israeli-centered agenda was no longer dominant, the habit of mind persisted, a habit reinforced from both directions. The Israelis continued to accept American largesse, perhaps for too long after it was economically meaningful. Even as Israeli standards of living were rising precipitously and personal wealth was accumulating rapidly, Israelis engaged in tax evasion in the European scale and tradition, developing comparatively little charitable ethic while continuing to accept the American spillover.

But the real change was precipitated by the Israeli's new relationship to the world. As we moved from a bipolar to a multipolar world, Israel diversified its focused investment in the successful "We are One" American campaign to the development of economic partnerships throughout the world. In the post-industrial world, wealth creation shifted from physical/material processing, in which Israel was virtually destitute, to knowledge processing, making Israel, virtually overnight, a country of enormous income-producing assets. New partners and subsidiaries, such as Microsoft, made Israel

a world center for our code development, in the human and plant genome projects, which reinvented the medical-industrial complex and the world agri-business respectively, the global entertainment integration, and the information wars that have dominated world conflict these past 30 years. The opportunities through trade and profit eclipsed the benefits of charity.

Ironically, American Jewish leadership clung to the central Israel campaign longer than did the beneficiaries. Remember that the power of the modern American Jewish campaign was spawned by, and for 50 years rode the back of, the Israel issue. There was simply no single, central issue to replace it. And there was little comprehension that the loss of the Israel issue was not a tragedy or a threat, but rather a resounding success that heralded the end of an era—from the centralized era to the decentralized, from the center directing and feeding the periphery to the periphery sustaining the center, from fortress community to enterprise community.

But our generation held fast to yesterday's exacting routines and standards, brooking no "compromises," even as our grandchildren turned away from the entire communal undertaking. It was beyond intolerance or rigidity. Somehow, there was no arena that fostered a vocabulary to describe the phenomenon of de-centralization, later called dis-aggregation, and to apply those new realities to Jewish communal life because it was simply outside my generation's world view.

With no progressive forum, the new ventures emanated the old beliefs. As individual American Jews moved left, toward the proliferation of options, the organized community turned right, underscoring group-think and the old ways.

In community after community, the momentum of centralized thinking cut off the evolution of new sprouts, new extensions of service to the underlying populace. Attempts to develop strong programs responsive to the new reality of American Jewry— services to the middle-class gerontological

deluge and programs appealing to the exercise, lifestyle, nutritional, and eclectic intellectual appetites of modern Jewish families—were squeezed off. They were seen as threatening to the center—too independent, too risky, not Jewish enough, not uniquely Jewish, too ambitious. The center cut itself off from the new era's explosive growth markets, from the evolution of new products and services that together could have bloomed to replace the once-generative qualities of Israel.

It was as if the old centralized parent, having witnessed the maturation and successful launching of its first-born, Israel, was too traumatized by the loss to extend similar energies for the growth and eventual independence of its next children, local community initiatives. This was an invitation to despair, for the center's only hope for sustenance and protection in its diminished later years was the strength of the local programs.

All the while, other American organizations were breaking themselves up—selling off and creating new independent divisions, small entrepreneurial teams to reduce the organization's drag and to free up energies, minds, and enthusiasms. Their centers moved from a control to service function, in which the centers helped others put ideas and resources together—by acting as brokers, finders, and accelerators—breaking logjams, not causing them. Power and energy were redirected to the periphery, to the proliferation of programs and services that acted more autonomously and more in confederations and networks. Even the largest enterprises could not eliminate layers, root out bureaucracy, and decentralize decision making fast enough. They were searching everywhere for entrepreneurs who would dream, ideate, create—to leap into the future.

At the same time, in contrast, the Jewish community was searching for bureaucrats, for communal servants who would toil in the existing framework, who could be managed, who would create waves only from treading water in traditional routines. And

they found them. Those professionals in turn helped recruit and set the agenda and the vision of lay leadership. The cycle became complete and immutable.

Yet, although the Jewish community came to an end, there continued to be Jews and Jewish organizations. The Jewish religion contains so much wisdom and vitality that for a shrunken core of practitioners it is a source of strength. And there continue to be rabbis, executive directors, administrators, and principals.

Yet, while the religion continues, the idea of community does not. There used to be arguments about whether Jews were a religion, a race, or a people. These earlier debates, hard to fathom today, revolved around a transcendent sense of involvement, of commitment to one another—a sense that there was engagement in a larger evolving creation. Somehow, there burned the idea that Jews would come together to shape an evolving destiny. It is this sense of collective possibility that has been extinguished. The strict constructionists won. Judaism became simply a religion, and an evolving Jewish community ceased to exist. There would be no further progress in the development of underlying principles and institutions, because all of the really big questions had been settled. The sense of possibility was gone. An alive, evolving, generative community was of blessed memory.

Ironically, the same synthetic mind, the computer, that heralded the post-industrial economy, which in turn washed away the Jewish community, also allowed this story to be remembered. That tool enabled the healthy long-lived members of my generation to genetically reprogram around the Alzheimer's, cancer, and ischemic heart epidemics—and made possible my telling of this tale, which I will conclude with one final memory.

At the end of the last century, Lewis Thomas wrote about his century's medical progress and, although he died on the cusp of the revolution that extended my life, he was prescient about the future. He lived through a succession of epidemiological epochs: the era of epidemics and receding pandemics, the "modern" era of degenerative disease (the elimination of acute infection), and the era of delayed degenerative disease (the early gerontological revolution), and he foretold the genetic and molecular era in which "cures" are affected internally. And he grappled with the meaning of the long life that his century produced. He wrote, "In my view, human civilization could not exist without an aging generation for its tranquility, and every individual would be deprived of an experience not to be missed in a well-run world" (Thomas, 1992, p. 76).

As I prepare to make my departure, I witness a functioning world but one very different from the one I anticipated. Even though it was three careers ago, I remember Jewish communal work, participating in the celebration of generations. Little remains that captures or awakens those collaborative experiences. These are memories unshared of a world lost—perhaps just flickering fantasies of a failing mind. Whereas I have no illusions that I will be missed, I feel I take with me an inheritance that should have been transferred. I leave a world that functions, but without the particular bond of Jewish community. Could it have been saved? Could it have evolved or adapted? I remember, and I wonder.

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