

The Jewish Communities of the Western United States

Steven Windmueller

- Twenty-five percent of all American Jews live in the Western United States. They represent a distinctive and growing voice within Jewish life.
- Different types of Western Jewish communities have emerged, reflecting unique economic and social factors. Western Jews have taken on many of the attributes associated with their region. They are struggling with the core issues of low affiliation, high intermarriage, and limited financial participation.
- The pioneering and independent spirit of the region has also fostered special Jewish communal and religious models. Experimentation has typified Jewish life in this part of the world. In some cases, rabbis have played a key role in developing mega-congregations and forming innovative cultural and political institutions.
- Distance from the "capital" of American Jewry, New York, has led to institutional conflicts that have further separated Western Jewry from the rest of the community.

Twenty-five percent of all American Jews live in the Western United States, representing a distinctive and growing voice within Jewish life. Participation and identity in these communities show different features from the rest of American Jewry, in part reflecting the social mores of the West. A lack of longstanding communal histories and established behaviors has also made it easier for Western Jewry to develop special creative aspects.

Clearly, not all Jewish communities in the West are the same. The histories and communal cultures of the San Francisco, Seattle, and Portland communities differ from each other to varying extents. As more established centers, these cities show characteristics both consonant with the national Jewish patterns and distinctive to the West. In turn, the communities of the "sun," including Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Phoenix, and San Diego, are more notably marked by attributes that separate Western Jewry from the rest of the nation:

1. The pioneering and independent spirit of the West, affecting Jewish contributions and choices
2. The special histories of Western communities
3. "Distance" from other centers of Jewish life as a factor in shaping Western Jewish behavior
4. The impact of the "wide open spaces" on the building of communities
5. The unique role of leaders, especially rabbis, in shaping Western Jewish life
6. The West as an alternative lifestyle model, affecting communal affiliation and participation

The Statistical Picture

The key Western Jewish communities that were considered in this study include:

Las Vegas	67,500 (2005)
Los Angeles (metropolitan area)	519,200 (1997) ¹
Phoenix	82,900 (2002)

Portland	31,858 (2000)
San Diego	89,000 (2003)
San Francisco (metropolitan area)	390,800 (2004) ²
Seattle	37,200 (2000)
Total	1,218,458

Individual Western Jewish communities were among the largest growth areas reported by the American Jewish Year Book (2006):

Las Vegas	55,000 (1995) to 67,500 (2005)
Phoenix	45,000 (1984) to 106,900 (2002) ³
San Diego	70,000 (1990) to 89,000 (2003)
San Francisco	119,000 (1986) to 228,000 (2004) ⁴

(metropolitan area)

Each of these communities is currently reporting that its population continues to grow, exceeding the last official numbers available.

Los Angeles, the nation's second largest city with 3,849,378 people, had a population of just over 100,000 in 1900. San Diego and San Jose, California, each had fewer than 100,000. Phoenix, which one hundred years ago was not even among the country's one hundred most populous cities, grew by more than 40,000 residents during the twelve months ending 1 July 2006. Phoenix thus passed Philadelphia, which has lost about 70,000 residents during the 2000s, to become the fifth largest American city.⁵ From July 2005 to July 2006, the two fastest-growing communities in the country were Gilbert, Arizona, a suburb of Phoenix that grew by 73.9% to 191,517, and North Las Vegas, Nevada, whose population increased by 71.1% to 197,567.⁶

As many as 10,000 new residents are arriving each month in the Phoenix metropolitan area. The 2002 Greater Phoenix Jewish Community Study found a total of 44,000 Jewish households in Greater Phoenix. This is an increase of 138% from 1984 and considerably greater than the 78% growth of general households within Greater Phoenix in the same period.⁷ The Phoenix study also found that "nearly half of Jewish households have lived in Greater Phoenix less than 10 years; 23%-10,000 households-have lived in the Valley five years or less."⁸

California is the third largest U.S. state by land area and ranks among the 10 largest economies in the world. Were it a separate country, the Golden State would be the world's thirty-fourth most populous, just behind Poland. Washington State has a GDP of \$268.5 billion and ranks fourteenth in the nation. Major business interests within the state include the design and manufacture of jet aircraft (Boeing), computer software development (Microsoft, Amazon, Nintendo), electronics, biotechnology, aluminum production, lumber and wood products, mining, and tourism. Oregon with an economy of \$132.7 billion is twenty-seventh in the nation.

These statistics reinforce one of the central features of Western communities in general and Western Jewish communities in particular: the absence of an indigenous population base. Few individuals can trace their family ties beyond one or two generations. This leads to a weaker role for religious institutions and other social infrastructures, and, in turn, a lack of leadership and commitment. As a result, communal and religious organizations constantly struggle to recruit new participants and to identify and engage new leadership.

The Pioneering and Independent Spirit

In the various periods of rapid growth, many new residents were immigrants seeking to make a new start. With these and other immigrants who had more commercial motives, the area developed a strong individualistic ethos. Communities were created whose residents shared no prior connection or allegiances. The open land allowed people to live much farther from neighbors than had been possible in Eastern cities, and an ethic of tolerance for others' values and goals emerged. California's state constitutions of 1849 and 1879 were largely drafted by groups concerned about personal property rights and freedom, arguably at the expense of ideals fostering civic community.

The region's distance from historical power centers in the East, and the celebrated "frontier spirit" of its settlers account for the West's independent, heterogeneous politics. Historically, the West was the first region to institute widespread women's suffrage. It birthed both the property rights and conservation movements and spawned such phenomena as the Taxpayer Revolt and the Berkeley Free Speech Movement.

Libertarian political tendencies, even if not labeled as such, are clearly evident in the region. For example, most of the Western states have legalized medicinal marijuana (all but New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming) and some forms of gambling (except Utah); Oregon has legalized euthanasia. Utah had a long history of polygamous territorial leaders; most counties in Nevada have legalized prostitution. There is less resistance to same-sex marriage: California and Hawaii recognize it, and only 28% of all Western residents oppose legal recognition compared to 48% in Southern states. California and Washington have moved to limit affirmative action.

The Impact of Western Jewry

Western Jewry is best defined in terms of various "pioneering" experiences. Jews were among the original pioneers who during the Gold Rush era helped settle the Western United States and launch the development of key cities such as San Francisco or Carson City, Nevada. Successful businesses and industries were established by Jews over time. In the nineteenth century, for example, the Levi-Strauss Company was formed in San Francisco and has continued to play an important role in the American clothing industry. More recently Starbucks Coffee, a Seattle-based corporation, has revolutionized American consumer habits. Jews were also among the first to make Las Vegas a gambling and entertainment center.

Ava Kahn and Marc Dollinger note regarding California's Jews:

Jewish immigrants to California took advantage of its physical environment, ethnic diversity, and cultural distinctiveness to fashion a form of Judaism unique in the American experience. California Jews enjoyed unprecedented access to political power a generation earlier than their New York counterparts. They thrived in the multicultural mix, redefining the classic black-white racial binary by forging relations with a variety of religious and ethnic groups in both San Francisco and Los Angeles.⁹

Jews were the driving force behind the Hollywood entertainment industry. Jews are also major players throughout the larger Western communities in the real estate and construction industries. They are often responsible for technological innovation, including in Silicon Valley. In the area of medical research, eight universities and teaching hospitals in the West that rank among the top in the nation have a significant presence of Jewish physicians, faculty, and researchers.

Political activism is also a trademark of Western Jews. Two of the centers of American Jewish liberalism are in the West, namely, the Bay Area and West Los Angeles. Large communities of [Iranian](#) and Russian Jews have supported pro-Israeli and hawkish political candidates. As in other areas of the United States, Jews in this region have been active in both political parties and for particular candidates and high-profile issues. Ever since settling in the West, Jews have served in public office at all levels.

Yet, while many Jews of the West are highly successful and well educated, the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS)¹⁰ reveals that overall, Jews in this part of the country fall somewhat short of levels elsewhere. Fifty-six percent have a college degree compared to the national American Jewish

average of 61%. Fifty-three percent of the West's Jews reported having an income above \$50,000 compared to rates of about 60% of Jews in the Midwest and the Northeast.

Jews of the West turned out to have lower level levels of religiosity. Only 5% indicated that they were Orthodox compared to 14% of Jews in the Northeast. Thirty-five percent of Western Jews described themselves as Reform, 19% as Conservative. Among Midwestern Jews, 46% considered themselves Reform and 25% as Conservative.¹¹

By all standards of affiliation and participation, Jews of the West rank lowest. They are also least likely to contribute to federation campaigns or other Jewish causes. Only 22% donate to federation campaigns and only 39% to any Jewish cause. In the Midwest, more than 37% of Jews give to federation campaigns and 48% to other Jewish causes.¹²

Israel is another measure of Jewish engagement. One can define "emotional attachment" as significant engagement with Israeli peoplehood and its political situation, economic support, and travel to Israel. Only 29% of Western Jews have traveled to Israel compared to 35% of American Jews generally and 49% of those in the Northeast. When asked about their emotional attachment to Israel, Western Jews are tied with Southern Jewry (29%) as having the lowest, compared to Northeastern (61%) and Midwestern (59%) Jewry who rank higher than any other American geographic region. In addition, only 50% of Western Jewry ranked Israel's need for U.S. financial support as very important. This was the lowest rate for the country; Southern Jewry led with 61%.

Jews of the West also give the least to all causes, Jewish and non-Jewish combined. Whereas 78% of Midwestern Jews, the highest givers in America, report giving to all causes, the figure for Western Jews is 69%.

"Using the Internet for Jewish purposes" produced a higher score among Western Jews (41%) than any other regional cohort except Midwestern Jews (46%). In contrast, Jews of the West were the least likely to read Jewish newspapers or magazines (62%); Midwestern Jews were the most likely (72%).

Western Jews are among the nation's wealthiest based on a number of business surveys, including the Forbes 400 where a significant percentage of all Jews mentioned reside in the West. At the same time, data from both the NJPS (2001) and local community studies show a higher percentage of Western Jews living in poverty. The NJPS (2001) found 46% of elderly Jewish households in the West with incomes under \$25,000 compared to the national Jewish average of 37%.¹³

Various community population studies conducted in key Western Jewish communities point to a set of defining social characteristics. The key elements are lower affiliation patterns and a larger percentage of adults compared to other regions of the country.¹⁴

The Distinctive Histories of Western Communities

Although the West is perceived as a single region, its Jewish communities have had distinctive histories.

In Northern California, the Gold Rush brought Jews who became prospectors and businessmen. To Arizona and Southern California came Jews who were merchants and traders. Among the earliest Jewish settlers in the Seattle area were Sephardic Jews, and they remain a significant part of that community. In general, the early Jewish settlers also became leaders in the public sector. "Between 1915 and 1931, Jews were elected to the governorships of Idaho, Utah, New Mexico, and Oregon..."¹⁵ In the Northwest, both "Christians and Jews...have shaped the region through engaging in politics, providing social services, establishing educational and health-care institutions and myriad other ways."¹⁶

The years surrounding World War II reshaped the Western communities. A population explosion enhanced the role and prominence of the Western cities and, in turn, their respective Jewish communities.

The history of Tucson's Jewish community reflected these developments:

Many immigrants [both Jewish and non-Jewish] who moved to Tucson in the '40s were military men who had been stationed at [the nearby] Davis Monthan [air force base] and fell in love with the Old Pueblo, parents to whom the dry desert climate had been recommended for their asthmatic children, or adults plagued with arthritis.

Following WWII, housing was very scarce; who could forget living in a converted chicken coop for several years? Employment was also a big problem. Teenage babysitters made 35 cents an hour, and there were few other jobs available to teens. Adults also found making a living a problem. On the bright side, newcomers were pleasantly surprised to find that Tucson had been a viable community for several hundred years, mostly populated by Indians and Hispanics. By 1948 [Tucson's Jews] had three thriving synagogues-Temple Emanu-El, Anshei Israel and Young Israel, several kosher butchers, a variety of Jewish organizations. The town had a community symphony, local theatrical groups and the University of Arizona. Tucson had always been the cultural star of Arizona and there was always a great feeling of personal pride in our community.¹⁷

Western Jewish communities are particularly proud of their pioneering pasts and in many cases have created historical societies and museums. Examples include the Arizona Jewish Historical Society; the Oregon Jewish Museum and the Jewish Genealogical Society of Oregon; the Jewish Historical Society of Southern California and the University of Southern California's Casden Institute on Jews in American Life; and the Western Jewish History Center in Berkeley.

San Francisco's Jewish community is marked both by its old wealth and its newly emergent wealth. The San Francisco Jewish Community Endowment Fund responds to emergencies and provides seed monies for innovative programs to ensure a Jewish future. "It consists of unrestricted, restricted and designated funds, over 880 donor-advised funds, and over 72 supporting foundations.... With more than \$2.8 billion in assets, the Endowment Fund is a vital community resource and is one of the country's most successful Jewish foundations."¹⁸ Two other primary San Francisco Jewish resources are the Koret Foundation, which supports organizations and initiatives in the fields of education, economic development in Israel, and strengthening Bay Area communities, and the Jim Joseph Foundation, which supports programs to enhance identity and engagement among Jewish youth.

The Factor of Distance from Other Jewish Centers

Being far from the "capital" of American Jewry, New York has had a profound psychological and functional impact on Western Jewry. The greater the distance from the center of Jewish power, the greater the institutional tensions. Many national institutions have had difficulties in organizational relationships with their West Coast affiliates. Western regional structures of synagogue movements, membership organizations, and policy groups have sometimes struggled with their central administration over questions of autonomy and proportional representation within these national systems.

An example is the 1995 decision by the Conservative-affiliated University of Judaism-now the American Jewish University-based in Bel-Air, California, to separate itself from the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. Similarly, Hadassah in the Pacific Southwest area has created a different organizational and governing model than that prescribed by the national administration.

A 2002 Los Angeles Times article, "American Jews Face East-West Power Struggle," highlighted the dismissal of the Anti-Defamation League's (ADL) longtime Los Angeles director David Lehrer. The story noted: "Among some Jews here, the brouhaha has reignited long-simmering resentment over the way national Jewish organizations in New York still treat Los Angeles as 'a colony,' as one put it. The same kind of tension-often between national headquarters and regional offices-has surfaced in other American Jewish organizations in recent years."

As Lehrer put it, "my ouster is in part a reflection of the East-West divide in American Jewry. I hope the Los Angeles Jewish community continues to assert its independence and uniqueness."¹⁹

Western federations, for example, have complained that their communities are underrepresented on national policy boards of the federated system and other governing bodies.²⁰ In turn, organizational

representatives have argued that the leadership in the West has failed to accept greater responsibility for actively participating in these national bodies. Other critics of Western Jewry have pointed to a longstanding absence of committed leaders from these communities who could play major roles in the national agencies.

Indeed, compared to other regions of the country, fewer national Jewish leaders emerge from Western communities. This is true of other Western religious communities as well. Correspondingly, fewer national political candidates emerge from Western states than other regions. Senator John McCain is the only current presidential candidate from a Western state, and thus far there have been only two Western presidents, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan.

The Impact of the "Wide Open Spaces" on Community Construction

Geographic distance plays an important role in the West. For example, it is 1064 miles (1713 kilometers) from San Diego to Seattle, or 652 miles (1049 kilometers) from Phoenix to San Francisco. These territorial challenges affect efforts to build or serve a community. Thus, Los Angeles County comprises 4000 square miles, 81 cities, and a population of 9.5 million people. If one includes the Greater Los Angeles area, then there are five counties (Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside, and Ventura) encompassing 33,953 square miles and a population of over 17.5 million.

The San Francisco Bay area comprises 7000 square miles, nine counties, 101 cities, and a population of 7.2 million. Seattle, which is the fifteenth largest metropolitan area in the nation, has 5894 square miles with 3.2 million residents, and incorporates the primary cities of Tacoma and Bellevue along with Seattle.

Western Jewish communities, then, face difficulties in creating shared points of connection and providing social and educational services. As a result, Jews who wish to escape the pressures associated with communal participation or synagogue membership can, in many Western communities, move outside the more densely settled and identified Jewish "neighborhoods." Second, since Western communities experience significant population movement, it is difficult for religious and communal structures to define population trends or strategically position core Jewish services.

Unique pockets of Jewish life are another distinguishing feature of the West. These include Hollywood with its high proportions of Jewish actors, writers, directors, and producers, and Silicon Valley with its many Jewish "techies" and entrepreneurs who have helped develop the hi-tech and biotech fields. Jews are also strongly represented in the growing financial sector and in the land development/real estate industry.

The West and Communal Participation

Climate as a Factor in Institution Building

Institutions in the West not only compete with other types of organizational entities for affiliation but must also contend with the climate. Although this is often not understood outside the region, the physical factor is a significant social and even cultural force in determining lifestyle choices, including where one chooses to live or the recreational pursuits available to individuals or families. Beachfront living, mountain settings, desert communities, and city-dwelling are a few of the residential "lifestyle" options available to Westerners. Emulating these patterns, Jews have adopted these same options.

New Communities

Unlike Jewish communities elsewhere in the United States, many West Coast communities are experiencing significant growth. San Diego's recently completed demographic study reveals certain patterns:

- Only one in 10 respondents was born in San Diego County, one in four in California.

- Nineteen percent of the respondents were born outside the United States.
- Fifty-four percent of Jewish adults have lived in San Diego for less than 20 years, 19% for less than five years.²¹

But in San Diego, as in many other Western locations, rapid growth and geographic sprawl are accompanied by low rates of engagement in the organized Jewish community:

- Only three out of 10 Jews report that they belong to a synagogue or temple.
- Only 46% report participation in organized Jewish activities.
- Thirty-five percent feel "not at all connected" to the San Diego Jewish community.²²

Diverse Immigrant Communities

The West has always been receptive to immigrants. Los Angeles and other parts of the West have become new population centers for Iranian, South African, and Latin American Jews. Significant numbers of Israeli²³ and Russian Jews have also found the West to be welcoming. In earlier times Sephardic Jews settled in Portland, Seattle, and the Los Angeles. Today, Los Angeles is home to one of the largest Israeli communities outside of Israel.

These communities often create distinctive institutional structures, for example, in the cases of the Sephardic, Russian, and Iranian Jews. Synagogues have been established to serve these constituencies; social and fraternal groups provide various support services; in some cases, umbrella representative bodies address shared concerns and financial priorities. For example, some 20 smaller organizations affiliate with the Iranian American Jewish Federation in Los Angeles. Similarly, Bay Area Russian Jews have created their own communal infrastructure that enables them to meet their specific needs. There are smaller pockets of Egyptian, [Syrian](#), [Iraqi](#), and Moroccan Jews in the Los Angeles area as well.

The Psychological Factor of Moving West

Some Jews come to the West to avoid the burdens of communal participation. They feel they have "done their Jewish thing somewhere else" and, once in the West, steer clear of the formal obligations associated with being a community participant or synagogue member. The results are seen in the extraordinarily low rates of affiliation and giving among Jews.

Alternative Models of Community

Jews take on the characteristics of others living in the West, often seeking alternative lifestyle options. There is a high degree of experimentation with Jewish religious and social practice. Beyond the core denominational movements, throughout Western communities one finds Jewish Renewal, Humanistic Judaism, and an array of unaffiliated synagogues. The Aviv of Arizona organization, located in the Phoenix area, serves gay and lesbian Jews. The Jewish Community of Sedona and the Verde Valley (Arizona) is a nonaffiliated congregation that, similar to Ikar in Los Angeles, describes itself as "creative, spiritual, and egalitarian, welcoming people of diverse backgrounds."²⁴

Although many Jewish communities now sponsor film festivals, nearly every Western Jewish community holds annual Jewish or Israeli film festivals including San Francisco, San Diego, Palm Springs, Orange County (California), Phoenix, Sacramento, Seattle, and Los Angeles. Other communities, such as Tucson, sponsor Jewish art festivals.

With new residents regularly arriving, most Western communities also have some type of welcoming system. Examples are "Shalom San Diego"; "Get Connected," a series of programs sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle; or "Jewish Newish," a project of the Jewish Federation of Greater Phoenix.

Although, as noted, New York remains the center for most national Jewish institutions, increasing numbers of groups have made the West their locus for organizing. Maintaining their home offices in Los

Angeles are: Mazon, the Jewish Response to Hunger;²⁵ the Simon Wiesenthal Center (see below); the Kabbalah Centre;²⁶ Jewish World Watch, "established in October, 2004 as a Jewish response to horrors perpetrated by human beings against others";²⁷ and Jews for Judaism, "an international organization that provides a wide variety of counseling services, along with education, and outreach programs that enable Jews of all ages to rediscover and strengthen their Jewish heritage."²⁸

The liberal magazine Tikkun is headquartered in the Bay Area. Toward Tradition, a conservative Jewish-Christian organization founded by Rabbi Daniel Lapin, is based in Seattle.²⁹

Jewish culture as an organizing theme has led to the establishment of Jewish museums, theaters, and arts programs. The Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles and the Contemporary Jewish Museum of San Francisco, which is scheduled to open in June 2008,³⁰ reflect this focus on making Jewish arts and culture a centerpiece of Western Jewish life. Similarly, the Brandeis-Bardin Institute (BBI) in Simi Valley, California, is a model of melding Jewish camping and culture.³¹ Recently, BBI merged with the University of Judaism to create the American Jewish University.

Numerous institutions related to health, spirituality, and Judaism can be found in the West including the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center and the Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health, which is based at the Los Angeles campus of Hebrew Union College. There is also much institutional innovation among Western communities, as in these examples:

- The Lehrhaus Judaica Library is a five-thousand-volume circulating academic Jewish-studies library, serving the Bay Area community from its facilities in Berkeley.
- The Progressive Jewish Alliance (PJA) was established in 1999 to assert an authentic progressive Jewish presence in the campaigns for social justice in Southern California, home to the nation's second largest city and second largest Jewish community. PJA educates, advocates and organizes on issues of peace, equality, diversity and justice, as a progressive voice in the Jewish community and a Jewish voice in the progressive community. Over the past six years, PJA has created a new model of Jewish community organizing, and has reinvigorated the progressive Jewish landscape in Los Angeles. In February 2005, PJA opened a San Francisco Bay Area chapter-our first expansion.³²
- Bashert, a Seattle-based program, reaches out to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews in that community "in order to build a stronger, more inclusive Jewish community. This initiative creates opportunities for Jews to come together, celebrate, and explore their Jewish identities in a welcoming environment."³³

Similar organizations and synagogues dedicated to specific Jewish constituencies operate in other Western communities, including J-Pride (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) in San Diego and the Institute on Judaism and Sexual Orientation, located on the Los Angeles campus of Hebrew Union College.

The Role of Leaders in Shaping Western Jewish Life

Lay leaders operate as kingmakers in controlling the distribution of power and personnel. In their history of the Jews of Los Angeles, Vorspan and Gartner identify several generations of such elites.³⁴ Two social clubs, Hillcrest in Los Angeles and the Concordia-Argonaut in the Bay Area, have generated the key Jewish leadership for these two premier Western communities. However, the peer economic and social relationships that sustain Jewish giving and engagement elsewhere in the United States are absent in many of these Western communities. This hinders building a culture of support for Jewish causes and a tradition of communal leadership. Outside of Los Angeles and San Francisco, this region's lay leadership has not shown the quality, depth, and capacity for cohesion found in the rest of the nation.

Indeed, rabbis play a far greater role in shaping Western Jewish public life than in any other region. Congregations and, more directly, their rabbinic leadership have emerged as key institution builders and community spokespersons. For example, Rabbi Isaiah Zeldin was the founding rabbi of the Stephen Wise

Temple (Reform) in Los Angeles. Considered today to be America's largest congregation, it serves more than ten thousand individuals and nearly 3000 families through its various schools and programs.

Other Western rabbis have played significant roles beyond their own spheres. Rabbi and author Harold Schulweis (Conservative) helped form the havurah (small Jewish collectives) movement, established the abovementioned Jewish World Watch, and introduced innovative religious practices. Rabbi and author David Wolpe (Conservative), named one of the 50 most influential American Jews by the Forward, has been invited to teach at a number of universities. Rabbi Steven Weil (Orthodox) is senior rabbi of Congregation Beth Jacob in Beverly Hills, the largest Orthodox congregation outside the New York metropolitan area, and is also an accomplished writer and lecturer.

Other rabbis across the West have had a profound influence on the public square. Rabbi Elliot Dorff (Conservative), rector and Sol and Anne Dorff Distinguished Service Professor in Philosophy at the American Jewish University, has played a significant national role in the debate over medical and social ethics. In Phoenix, rabbis such as Albert Plotkin and A. Lincoln Krohn (Reform) not only helped develop local Jewish religious life but also helped shape the larger community's civic culture by supporting the establishment of the Phoenix Symphony, the city's art museum, and its United Way structure, while also advocating for Indian rights.

Some of the main communal-institution builders have been rabbis. For example, Rabbi Uri Herscher is founding director and CEO of the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles and Rabbi Brian Lurie, who is active in various civic causes, was executive director of the San Francisco Jewish Community Federation and later national director of the United Jewish Appeal. Rabbi Marvin Hier established the Simon Wiesenthal Center and the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. Rabbi Hier's contributions include the visibility and popularity of the Museum of Tolerance as well as the national and international growth of programs on the Holocaust, tolerance, and counteracting anti-Semitism that originate in the Wiesenthal Center.

Western Jewish politicians have long played a prominent role on both the local and national levels. Jews have also served over time as city-council members, mayors, and state officials throughout the West. Currently seven members of the House of Representatives and two U.S. Senators are Western Jews, including both Senators from California, Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein.

Summing Up

Jews of the West represent a new breed of American Jewry. Despite such challenges as low affiliation patterns, high intermarriage rates, and limited financial participation, Western Jewry has generated new organizational models. The Western pioneering spirit seems to have made its mark on Jewish communities as well and inspired their leadership.

Some critics have suggested that some of the West's problems of affiliation and participation will become more prevalent among American Jewry in general. But as the Western communities grow, some of their new institutional and religious models are also likely to find their way to other regions.

Los Angeles and San Francisco anchor and dominate West Coast Jewish life through their financial prowess, institutional creativity, and distinctive cadre of Jewish leaders. Los Angeles in particular, given its size and its status as an entertainment and media center, will continue to influence American Jewish culture overall.

The distance from New York means Western Jews will continue to struggle with questions of autonomy and control. Regarding the special character of the West's Jews, it has been noted that: "There is a solid tradition of outdoorsy Jews who have abandoned their synagogues for the mountains."³⁵ To some extent both a new type of Jew and a different type of Jewish community are emerging in the West. A distinguishing feature is the alignment of this emergent Judaism with the arts and culture, and with the environment and social justice concerns.

Western Jewry shows the characteristics of the Western United States in general, including innovation, cultural diversity, and mobility. At the same time, the West Coast institutional models in particular integrate traditional Jewish tenets of tzedakah (charitable giving), gemilut hasadim (generosity and kindness), and avodah (worship).

Prof. Ava Kahn's words about California relate to Western Jewry generally:

"There's an idea this is the promised land, with the same climate. I think California has always been a place people can reinvent themselves.... And I think Jews are a part of this. People can come out from wherever they were in the world to California and start over."³⁶

The story of Western Jewry is still unfolding and is one of the most challenging and interesting American Jewish experiences.

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Notes

1. This figure is based on the last community study undertaken by the Jewish Federation of Los Angeles.
2. This figure encompasses the Greater Bay Area Jewish community. The 2004 study by the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties projects that a comparative population increase occurred in the other federated communities of the Bay Area, namely, the Jewish Community Federation of Silicon Valley and the Jewish Community Federation of the Greater East Bay. If so, the Bay Area would represent the third largest metropolitan Jewish population in the United States (behind New York and Los Angeles).
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9. Ava Kahn and Marc Dollinger, eds., *California Jews* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2003), www.upne.com/1-58465-060-5.html.
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15. Moses Rischin, ed., *The Jews of the West: The Metropolitan Years* (New York: American Jewish Historical Society, 1979).

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Dr. Steven Windmueller is dean of the Los Angeles campus of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. Before his twelve-year tenure at the College-Institute, he served for ten years as director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of the Los Angeles Jewish Federation and as director of the Greater Albany Jewish Federation. A fellow of the [Jerusalem](#) Center for Public Affairs, he has written extensively on political matters and communal trends. Dr. Windmueller holds a PhD in international relations from the University of Pennsylvania.