BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE AND CARING JEWISH COMMUNITY

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Efforts to build an inclusive and caring Jewish community are threatened by three societal forces: the shift from an ethnic to a religious/spiritual identity, the lowering of boundaries and the decline of dissonance, and the ubiquity of choice. Implications are drawn for outreach to the Jewish community, intermarriage, and the larger community.

Building an inclusive and caring Jewish community contributes to the flourishing and survival of that community. Creating such a community requires knowledge of what the community is and a vision of what it can become. Both lay and professional leaders can make it happen when they combine their financial and intellectual resources and their enthusiasm for bringing Jews together to build friendships, study Torah, participate in holiday celebrations, and raise their children in a pronounced Jewish milieu.

Three societal forces threaten these efforts:

1. the shift from an ethnic identity to a religious/spiritual identity
2. the lowering of boundaries and the decline of dissonance
3. choosing an identity

This article explores the implications of those societal forces on the organized Jewish community's outreach efforts toward Jewish agencies, the intermarried, and the general community.

SHIFT FROM ETHNIC IDENTITY TO RELIGIOUS/SPIRITUAL IDENTITY

Ethnic Identity

An ethnic identity consists of a strong sense of belonging to a group with a shared history, values, and culture. In sociologist

Charles Liebman's words, "The rhetoric of ethnicity concentrates on themes such as peoplehood, community, and solidarity. Its message centers on slogans such as 'We Are One'" (1999, p. 11). It is akin to a primary group where relationships are intense and intimate.

Historically, their ethnic identity gave Jews a strong allegiance to a larger collectivity — *Klal Yisrael*. Identity, the core of which was believed to be unchangeable, was ascribed to an individual at birth. Jewish children were socialized into Jewish life by their parents, teachers, and rabbis, thus confirming their innate Jewish identities. "The community of belief constituted a *total system* (italics added) that controlled the individual's environment with a detailed pattern of prescribed actions and fixed roles. Group membership was thus clearly defined" (Medding et al., 1992, p. 16).

Group membership in the traditional Jewish community meant that individual Jews identified with the goals and aspirations, the joys and travails, of the Jewish community as a whole. The destinies of individuals and community were intertwined (Zborowski & Herzog, 1964). "Traditional Judaism sanctified the mundane, the everyday, the banal" (Liebman, 1999, p. 12).

Believing that they were a chosen people, Jews were "defined out of anonymity and into a unique fate through identification with the Jewish people" (Eisen, 1990, p. 28). Chosenness served to reinforce the boundaries between Jews and Gentiles and strengthened both individual and group identities. "The self was enlarged through the aggrandizement of the group" (Eisen, 1990, p. 32). The

total system was dominated by Judaism, which had the moral power to coerce individuals to follow detailed patterns of prescribed behavior according to Jewish law. Living in an institutionalized world with clearly prescribed norms of behavior enabled Jews to accept their defined roles without question and without thinking about alternatives (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Thus, the choice of identity was non-existent.

In modern times, the authority of tradition has waned (Shils, 1981; Linzer, 1984). The traditional Jewish identity that existed in the Eastern European shtetl is no longer a relevant model capable of being replicated in modern times (Farber & Waxman, 1999).

In contrast, "the contemporary *community of shared individual feelings* (italics added) is a voluntary and partial community of personal choice, with unclear boundaries and undefined membership. It is characterized by emotions and attachments that, while often deep, are not always clearly articulated" (Medding et al., 1992, p. 16).

Once the ties binding individuals to the group have been attenuated, the continuity of the group is threatened. Personalism, according to Liebman (1999), detaches individuals from the larger social collectives of which they are a part and leads them toward self-directed lives that pursue rare moments of meaning and growth.

The picture, though, is not entirely bleak. There has not been a complete break with the past; ethnic identity still persists. It has inspired Jews to assist emigres from the Former Soviet Union to leave their country and help those who are staying to develop a thriving Jewish life. It has enabled Ethiopian Jews to make *aliyah* and begin a new life in Israel. It is currently concerned with the trials and tribulations of Israel. In these instances, identification with *Klal Yisrael* transcended individual identity, even as it strengthened it.

Religious/Spiritual Identity

The shift from an ethnic to a religious/spiritual identity has motivated individual Jews to become more involved in a search for meaning to connect with God and with the spiritual in life. The striving for spirituality is essentially an individual endeavor. We may pray together, but our search for connection with the Divine is idiosyncratic. The ethnic group tends not to occupy an important place for those seeking spirituality.

Replacing an ethnic identity with a religious/spiritual identity results in Judaism becoming a privatized religion. An ethnic group displays its culture and religion in very public ways—in the streets, the workplace, and in everyday life for others to see. There is a sense of pride in the group's accomplishments and a feeling of being uplifted through its successes. Levels of philanthropic giving are high.

In contrast, people involved in the search for meaning do so privately without fanfare and public displays. It is essentially a lonely search. To be sure, social relationships continue, but the search for spirituality does not lead to self-transcendence in the ethnic group. Responsibilities toward abstract collectives such as the Jewish people decline in significance. "Perhaps most significant of all is the decision of United Jewish Appeal to abandon its classic slogan, 'We Are One' that epitomizes the public, ethnic dimension of Judaism for a personal, privatized one: 'For Ourselves, for our children, for Israel'" (Liebman, 1999, p. 11).

The Saturday program of "The Living Waters Weekend" sponsored by a synagogue in Fort Lauderdale, FL, exemplifies this quest.

> Optional sunrise walk and meditation. Musical worship service at the ocean. Guided conscious eating at breakfast. Water exercises for body toning. Yoga with Kabbalah. Relaxation time. Luncheon recalling our heroes. Outdoor games, informal talk, time for massage. Sacred gathering for men and women. Poetry reading and pre-dinner music. Sunset barbecue and folk dancing. Havdalah ritual on the beach. Kabbalistic meditation (Liebman, 1999, p. 12).

Note that the Sabbath does not figure prominently in the description of this day.

The search for spirituality is not central in Judaism where the goal is to be a holy people—

am kadosh. One achieves *kedushah*—holiness through performing *mitzvot,* the commandments, and not through contemplation.

Implications for Outreach to the Jewish Community

The shift from an ethnic to a religious/spiritual identity underscores the decline of involvement and participation in Jewish communal organizations. Eisen (2000), citing his study of "moderately active Jews" conducted with Steven M. Cohen, contends that the sense of obligation to other Jews, whether locally, nationally, or internationally, has declined. When it does exist, it is socially constructed, deriving from interaction with people on a daily basis, rather than from the Sinaitic covenant. As a consequence, Jews reserve the right to end their participation at any time they do not find personal meaning in a Jewish activity.

Eisen suggests that the way to build communities of Torah in a situation of voluntarism is to make available "a variety of settings in which individual Jews are palpably connected to other Jews at the same time that they are engaged in the practice of caring, justice and Jewish learning" (Eisen, 2000, p. 3). The variety of settings includes synagogues, day schools, camps, and JCCs.

Barry Shrage, President of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Boston, has called for the establishment of communities of caring, justice, and learning through federation-synagogue collaboration.

To build a caring community, Dr. John Ruskay of the UJA-Federation of New York (2000) calls for a social worker in every synagogue, JCC, and Hillel who is available to counsel parents about their children; respond to the problems of marital strife, domestic violence, or terminal illness; and help young adults deal with the loneliness and identity crises they experience during college.

THE LOWERING OF BOUNDARIES AND THE DECLINE OF DISSONANCE

Boundaries

Two concepts that contribute to an understanding of modern identity are boundaries and dissonance (Linzer, 1996). Boundaries refer to the physical and cultural separation between one group and another. They have two essential functions: to keep members of the group in and non-members out, thereby maintaining the viability and distinctiveness of the group.

In an open society, ethnic groups are faced with a constant struggle to thwart cultural inroads that lead to assimilation. This is where the role of boundaries comes in. When boundaries are high, the group leaders and members demonstrate their desire to maintain the distinctiveness between their group and other groups. When boundaries are low, the group conveys the idea that it would very much like its members to participate in the majority culture, that it is not afraid of acculturation, and that the group expects to thrive in interaction with the society. When boundaries no longer exist, the group has completely assimilated and it disappears.

The higher, more impermeable the boundary, the greater the chance of preserving separateness and continuity. The lower, more permeable the boundary, the greater the chance of eliminating separateness and increasing assimilation (Linzer, 2000).

A higher boundary is displayed when male Jews wear *kipot* and married women cover their hair in public, when parents educate their children in day schools and yeshivas and observe the Sabbath and kashrut, when Jews speak Yiddish or Hebrew, or wear Hasidic garb in public. A lower boundary is displayed when parents do not observe the Sabbath and kashrut and send their children to public schools and colleges where there are no Hillels or other Jewish organizations on campus.

Dissonance

One consequence of permeable boundaries that permit easy access and egress is the decline of dissonance. Dissonance is the state of discomfort that results from the experience of difference. Throughout their history, dissonance was both a burden and an opportunity for Jews—a burden due to prejudice and persecution, and an opportunity for spiritual

and intellectual growth through the study of Torah and the performance of *mitzvot*.

Dissonance is an essential ingredient in preserving group distinctiveness. If group members do not value their difference from others, despite the discomfort it may engender, the group may disappear (Linzer, 1998).

An important feature of traditional Jewish identity can be traced to Jews' "otherness": "Behold, this is a nation that lives alone and is not reckoned among the nations" (Numbers 23:9). Historically, Jews' separateness was self-imposed, but was also reinforced by the nations among whom they lived. This separateness, which led to dissonance, has been diminished in modern times with the Jewish community's greater acceptance into the mainstream of Western society.

In his study of American Jewish young adults, Meir (1993) showed that they do not feel different from other Americans, that they do not perceive themselves as outsiders but as insiders in American society. They are both proud of their Jewish heritage and integrated into all echelons of American society. The most prominent recent symbol of integration is Senator Joseph Lieberman's candidacy for the vice-presidency.

Does the decline of dissonance presage eventual assimilation through the loss of Jewish identity, or does it reflect a new form of identity that can assimilate both Jewish and American identities in a mediating balance? The results are not yet in.

Implications for Outreach to the Intermarried

The concepts of boundaries and dissonance directly affect our understanding of the intermarriage phenomenon. Intermarriage took center stage on the communal agenda when the National Jewish Population Survey (1990) indicated a 52% rate. A recent survey by the American Jewish Committee (2000) revealed that 80 percent of respondents agreed that intermarriage is inevitable in an open society.

Jews have moved from an attitude of exclusion of the Gentile spouse and intermarried family to one of inclusion, indicating a significant lowering of boundaries between Jews and Gentiles and the absence of dissonance. Inclusion appears to be official community policy, as Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist synagogues, JCCs, and Jewish family service agencies all serve intermarried families. Intermarried families are included in efforts at community building. In the American Jewish Committee survey (2000), 81 percent of respondents agreed that the Jewish community should reach out to intermarried families.

In a thorough discussion of Jewish communal policy toward intermarried families, Liebman and Fishman (2000) present arguments for and against outreach.

Proponents of outreach believe that intermarriage is inevitable and is likely to increase in the future. Therefore, the Jewish community should commit resources toward welcoming interfaith couples, regardless of whether the non-Jewish partner is interested in conversion. Unless we do, we will experience a substantial diminution in the size of the Jewish community in the future.

Opponents of outreach argue that the proponents' basic assumption that intermarriage is inevitable is inaccurate. A number of recent studies conclude that the Jewishness of the parental family, the length and intensity of Jewish education, participation in informal Jewish education such as camps and youth groups, and high school dating patterns with primarily Jewish friends are factors associated with reduced rates of intermarriage. Intermarriage is not, therefore, a tidal wave threatening to carry away individuals randomly.

Outreach efforts take money away from enticing Jewish educational programs to children and adults. The overwhelming majority of intermarried seem not to be interested in outreach programs. Sponsoring outreach may send the message that the Jewish community legitimates mixed marriage.

Bayme (1998) argues for a policy along three tracks: prevention, conversion, and outreach. He suggests that the Jewish community not abandon the language of preven-

tion but encourage young people to seek out Jewishly dense environments. In the American Jewish Committee survey (2000), only 25 percent of respondents agreed that the best approach to intermarried families is conversion, whereas 68 percent disagreed. Despite this negative attitude and the low rate of conversion, the community has a vested interest in enhancing efforts to secure greater conversion. Conversion is a pillar of Reform Judaism's policy toward the intermarried (Greenwood, 1998).

Outreach seems to be public policy at the moment. It is inevitable that a policy of inclusion influences the ethnic and religious character of Jewish institutions such as synagogues, day schools and JCCs. "Inclusion of mixed marrieds within communal institutions risks diluting the core values of what it means to have a Jewish family" (Block, 1998, p. 144). We give mixed signals when we officially oppose intermarriage but encourage outreach.

CHOOSING AN IDENTITY

Choice of identity is a ubiquitous phenomenon that bespeaks the modern **achievement** of identity in contrast with the traditional **ascription** of identity (Linzer, 1996). Ascription of identity refers to the identity given at birth that one carries for the rest of one's life. Achievement of identity implies that, with hard work and diligence, one can change childhood identity and become whatever one chooses. The central components of identity, such as belief, faith, and religious affiliation, are regarded as matters of personal choice.

In their study, Hammond and Warner (cited in Farber & Waxman, 1999) found that 77 percent of Americans supported the statement that "an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any church or synagogue" (p. 193).

If one wants to maintain a dual Jewish identity—as an American and a Jew—one must select from among ideologies and behaviors available in the society. One needs to choose who one wants to be. The benefit of choice is the freedom to choose what and who one wants to be. The deficit of choice is the difficulty of choosing from among so many alternatives and the confusion that may ensue.

With the advent of the Jewish continuity commissions and their evolution into the Jewish Renaissance agenda, many federations and their constituent agencies have been inspired to develop innovative programs and services to strengthen the Jewish identity of affiliated Jews and to reach out to the unaffiliated and marginally affiliated. One such effort is the Makor community center funded by Michael Steinhardt in New York City as an attempt to reach out to young adult Jews with trendy social and cultural programs in a sophisticated ambience.

The ubiquity of choice exists not only on an individual level but also on a communal level. The religious denominations that choose to believe and practice Judaism in different ways have created tensions among themselves both here in the United States and in Israel. In many communities rabbis from different denominations do not talk to each other. In Israel, the gaps within the religious and between the religious and secular groups are so wide that the chasm seems unbridgeable.

Implications for Outreach to the Larger Community

In addition to leading to conflicts within the Jewish community, the issue of choice and respect for difference affects the relationship between Jewish agencies and the larger community. We cannot build a viable Jewish community in isolation from the larger community. We do not live in a shtetl nor would we want to. Working relationships with the larger community must be fostered and collaborative efforts developed. Substance abuse, domestic violence, homelessness, AIDS, and mental illness affect all organized institutions in the community.

It is a mitzvah to help the non-Jewish poor as well as the Jewish poor and to visit the non-Jewish sick as well as the Jewish sick. The Jewish community has always engaged in social action for the betterment of the community. By reaching out to other faiths and ethnic groups, the Jewish community shares

its expertise and struggles with others and demonstrates its willingness to share its successes as well as its failures.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, trends that accelerate the shift from ethnicity to spirituality, the lowering of boundaries and the decline of dissonance, and the ubiquity of choice portend a serious threat to Jewish continuity. The challenge for community leaders and professional staff is how to inspire people to want to identify with the community in order to make it an inclusive and caring community.

Jeffrey Solomon (Wexler & Solomon, 2000, p. 8) recently wrote, "Our current crisis is the crisis of being a normalized American ethnic/religious community. We built a volunteer-professional infrastructure on the excitement of crises, and those crises have been resolved. This very phase of normality forces us to reassess everything we do."

He continued, "We seem to lack a cause. Soviet Jewry, Argentinean Jewry, Cuban Jewry are not enough. Jewish education, poverty, spousal abuse are not enough. Birthright is not enough. What about basing that campaign on Torah, on those values and traditions that have sustained the community around the world throughout history. Why can't that be enough" (2000, p. 14)?

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