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The Jewish Role in a Global Village, and the Impact of Globalism on the Jewish Community

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by Simha Rosenberg

The title of this session raised topics so immense, complex, and inter-connected that it was a good thing I was given a very long lead time to prepare. First, I was struck by how far-sighted and interesting the whole premise of the conference was. And then I was struck by how intimidating it is to make predictions, especially publicly – and particularly in a session with such august colleagues (co-panelist Rabbi Steve Gutow, President and CEO of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, and moderator Ruth Messinger, President of American Jewish World Service).

So, by way of disclaimer, I am not a futurist, and much of what I say here may well be irrelevant in 2030, if not flat out wrong. Still, I believe there are true and valuable things to think about, whether or not the Jewish community or the world turns out as anticipated in this presentation. My presentation will focus on three areas in which globalism will have an impact on the Jewish community and two ways of looking at the Jewish role in a global world.

1. Impact of globalism in Individual Jews' work and social lives

Globalism has already begun to have fairly dramatic effects on individual Jews' work and personal lives. Increasingly, Jews are working for multinational companies, or for businesses which outsource a considerable part of their operations in other countries. Entrepreneurship will continue to take more Jews from North America into overseas markets. Professional collaborations, contacts, exchanges, and contacts, especially online, are likely to involve people from more and more countries. By 2030 it is a safe bet that a larger number of Jews will be living, traveling, on the phone, and connecting in online communities with people and places all over the world. The perspectives, views, questions and assumptions of their global colleagues are bound to have an impact on the views of these members of our community. Their livelihoods and their capacity to contribute to Jewish communal efforts will be, at least to some extent, affected by and dependent on what happens elsewhere. They already have access to an unprecedented amount of information and research tools on which to base the choices in their Jewish journeys and they will need and support new models of Jewish life to fit the reality that a growing part of their lives will involve places that may not have established Jewish communities or organizations on the ground.

2. Impact of emerging economic powers and educational elites

Emerging economies and elites in Asia, South America, and at some point in Africa are going to bring both new opportunities and new competition. What overall effect this will have on the

socio-economic status of the Jewish community as a whole I am not equipped to predict. However, global financial markets are already deeply intertwined, and the Jewish community is clearly not immune or isolated from these macro forces. Jewish institutions typically are silent on all issues that don't impact Jews in any particular way. This means that on the most important macro-issues of our time the failure of Jewish institutions to offer thought-leadership drives Jews to look elsewhere for meaningful responses. Jewish organizations risk becoming increasingly marginalized and trivialized – coming to be perceived as so parochial, second rate, and so hopelessly out of touch as to be irrelevant, or worse, an embarrassment.

Additionally, Jewish history and concerns have had a centrality in twentieth century global discussions that may change considerably in the next 20 years. Other sessions will focus specifically on Israel, but no discussion of a global world and the Jewish community can completely leave out the fact that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has enormous implications for other issues. A positive resolution would be an enormous collective achievement, and liberate our community to more fully embrace and respond to the new global realities that are inevitably coming.

3. Climate change is inextricably linked to economic change, and has immense moral implications

If Lester Brown of the Earth Policy Institute is correct, the impact of rapid melting of the Himalayan snow/ice mass – just one effect of global warming – will set off huge crop failures in Asia, pushing newly wealthy Asian countries to compete for grain, driving up world prices. This is just one of the massive cumulative effects that are looming, but the exact timing and extent are still uncertain. Add all the incalculable effects of catastrophic die-offs in the vast northern forests of Europe and Asia, rapid retreat of other major glacial watersheds, rising sea levels, droughts, floods, and severe storms. Even wealthy countries will be buffeted and impoverished by these events. More fragile countries could default on their debts, be destabilized by food shortages, or in worst case scenarios, become failed states. Population growth and rising economic consumption will amplify and accelerate these gigantic shifts. These issues are about the very life and death of hundreds of species, scores of cultures, and countless thousands of individual people. The Jewish community so far has left these issues largely to relatively smaller and newer Jewish organizations. Our community is in danger of not only being *seen* as insular and self-interested if we fail to address these issues more centrally and consistently. We risk actually being morally absent in a struggle in which there can be no moral neutrality or excuse for inaction.

There are two major ways in which I see a Jewish role in ensuring a sustainable, safe, healthy, and vibrant global village – first in the ways in which our institutions and individual Jews relate to globalism within our community, and second in the ways in which we articulate and adhere to principles as the only viable way to also attend to our interests.

1. Broaden the definition of who and what are serving the communal good

Jews working in and connecting to far-flung places need new models of Jewish connection – community, learning, and celebration – and, however inadvertently, they are also communal

ambassadors. Our community needs to offer thoughtful, culturally sensitive ways to support global Jews being articulate and respectful teachers of Judaism, in some cases to colleagues and co-workers who have met few, if any, Jews before.

Moreover, Jews in the thousands are choosing to be such ambassadors, through service in the US and all over the world. Our community needs to recognize service to others as an honored form of service to our own community.

Finally, there are generations of Jews, literally hundreds of thousands, who see their life-long endeavors in teaching, in scientific research, in medicine, in social service as a deep and authentic expression of their Jewishness. Their work in sustainable energy and conservation, in eradicating disease and poverty, in promoting education, health, and well-being in disadvantaged communities – these things are their primary Jewish identification and observance.

Let me add here that I believe categorically in Jewish education, observance, and culture. Both my children went to day schools and I married into a family with three rabbis. I am not making equivalences among different aspects of Jewishness. However, in the big tent of 2030, we need to truly see pursuit of social justice and sustainable development as a form of Jewish expression, to embrace it, to give prestigious communal awards for it, and find ways to welcome and integrate its practitioners into our other forms of Jewish practice. The Jewish community needs these contributions to our global role, and validating this form of Jewishness will be an important way to strengthen these Jews' identity as Jews.

2. To ensure our community's future, we have to adhere to principles for ensuring the global future

First and foremost among these principles is stewarding the earth. We are not going to have the “luxury” of worrying about a Jewish future if we have no global future. Climate change must occupy a place at the heart of every Jewish institutional agenda, in every community, from the level of reducing our communal carbon footprint to making advocacy for sustainable development and reversing global warming among the top five items on our communal agenda.

Additionally, we need to embrace and engage with the emerging democratization and economic prosperity of other countries. We can advocate more strongly for our community's interests with more rather than fewer allies. We can more credibly call for corporate social responsibility in the emerging economic powers if our community is acting in accordance with standards of corporate responsibility. We can more readily hold other groups accountable for adherence to principles of law if we advocate for and uphold those principles actively and vigilantly in the US and in Israel. For example, I realize that the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia give rise to legitimate concerns and are only beginnings that may fall short of resulting in truly democratic societies. But they are also triumphs of the human spirit and need to be celebrated as such.

Finally, since I was asked to address the future of globalism and the Jewish community, and since I really have no qualifications for predicting the future, I have to fall back on our prophetic tradition of globalism – a vision of history and a redemptive future based on justice and a

recognition that all the world and we and all the nations in it are of divine origin and are the subjects of divine concern.

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This article is from a series prepared by presenters at [Judaism2030: A Working Conference for a Vibrant Jewish Future](#).