

A Response to “The Life and Death of a Dream”

Dreams That Cannot Die

Hillel Levine

I congratulate the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* for republishing Gary Rosenblatt’s article, “The Life of a Dream,” 31 years later, which is a piece of investigative journalism of Jewish communal affairs that is still unmatched. It analyzes moments of communal reflectiveness and surges of vision and vitality from unexpected quarters. To be sure, those moments are not unique.

But what was at stake in the success of the Institute for Jewish Life as a response to the set of events in the Fall of 1969 was the preservation of one important feature of Jewish survival: an organizational center. Jews’ capacity to survive and flourish for millennia under circumstances that strained the abilities of other larger and more powerful groups depended on some such center. In 1969 that center—in response to emergencies, on the one hand, but also to great opportunities, on the other—could mobilize the world’s largest and most influential Jewish community. It needed some fixing, but it resisted change, thereby stagnating and becoming a haunting shadow of itself. The focus of this retrospective should be on the Federation movement itself, what was then called the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, and on the Jewish “voluntary” organizations, with their interlocking networks of leadership that supported the Federation movement and were rewarded with legitimation and sometimes funding for their compliance.

THE CENTER CANNOT HOLD

The “death” of a center for what was, if anything, an overly organized Jewish community and the continued danger for Jewish life and values that resulted are what I would like now to underscore, so many years later. Although new configurations of the Council of Jewish Federations have been attempted by Joe Kanfer and others in recent years, what was lost by the concerted efforts of some at that time to water down enthusiasms and initiatives, as Gary Rosenblatt describes, has not yet been replaced.

When I and the other members of that ad hoc committee of Concerned Jewish Students arrived at the General Assembly meeting in Boston on November 13, 1969, we were astounded by what we saw. At the very moment when I was representing my colleagues in this “confrontation” with a long list of *kvetches*, I was overwhelmed by thoughts of general assemblies of Jewish leaders throughout Jewish history: from Moses centralizing and bureaucratizing the twelve tribes in

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the desert, to the period of the Judges and the Kings, to Usha in the mid-second century CE that legislated decisive decisions against a Jewish sect called Christianity, to Babylon and Spain in the Middle Ages, to what still could serve as a model of federalism and representation, the Council of Four Lands in 16th-century Poland, to the Hakham Bashi of the Ottoman Empire, and on to some of the more ambiguous forms of central organization in the early modern and modern worlds. What an inspiration it was to see so many serious and talented people trying to work out “What’s good for the Jews?” Our confrontation was not prompted by rage. We were impressed by the continuity in this leadership to huddle, but disappointed by unfulfilled expectations. The arbitrary number for a collective pot of \$100 million is what is remembered, but the opportunities that were lost were far greater.

Shortly after those November days, I visited my dear teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel, in New York. The responses to the General Assembly, including Gordon Zachs’ proposal as the “loyal opposition,” had picked up enough traction that there was already the talk of some new representative body to be organized, and I was delegated to speak with this great scholar and activist about his service on this new entity. My teacher welcomed me into his smoke-filled study and expressed his concern for the manner in which I was spending my time as a student, a concern that I shared more deeply than what I could convey. But by then my enthusiasm for what was transpiring was great. I justified my temporary neglect of my studies by the potential for a renewed American Jewish life catalyzed by Jewish Federations. These organizations would become both committed to fulfilling Jewish values in programs and in their governance, and at the same time be representative of the broadest spectrum of Jews and their experiences—whether rich or poor with their special needs and vulnerabilities, pious or secular, urban or rural, learned or committed to other types of Jewish expression—while leading American Jews in response to emergencies and emerging opportunities. I also saw these recent developments in the organized Jewish community as parallel to a larger American agenda, precipitated by the civil rights movement in which many of us had participated: sustaining America as a unified nation with equal rights guaranteed for all individual citizens and one that would support flourishing cultures and collective entitlements of communities. The Federations should be at the center of Jewish existence as a community.

Heschel was unimpressed and even irritated by my demand that he serve on the board of the Institute for Jewish Life and come to occasional meetings. He mumbled some disparaging words about what these Jewish organizations are like and then looked up from his books and glared at me for what felt like an endless moment. “My dear friend,” he said with his typical graciousness, “if I could be sure that this institute of yours would produce one good Hebrew schoolteacher I would join you.” I could hardly contain my impatience with my dear teacher’s minimalism and made some reference to “Bunche Shvieg,” the great Yiddish story about the most righteous man of his generation requesting as his reward nothing more than a “hot buttered roll.” Heschel looked sullen.

Heschel’s skepticism in regard to the ability of the organized Jewish community to transform itself by engaging in deliberations over Jewish needs inspired by Jewish values and involving the participation of the broadest spectrum of Jews proved to be correct. Jewish life has thrived and diversified in the past four

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decades, but it has done so with what was often paltry support and guidance, even opposition from that center. The day schools of whatever quality and accessibility to Jews with different incomes got built, and most of the endangered Jews from Moscow and Addis Abba got rescued. Jewish Studies on campuses across the country were paid for by alumni, but without any central planning within the Jewish community, they ended up hopelessly stuck in Religion Departments where their influence would become limited, and were taught by academics who had little support from the Jewish community and little opportunity to master the many subfields in which Jewish scholars should be knowledgeable.

To be sure, the Jewish community is a much more exciting place than it was in 1969. More Jewish subgroups are better serviced by Federations and by organizations that are Federation supported. The size of the Jewish civil service has surged. Many professional Jewish leaders, rabbis, teachers, and Federation administrators are far better educated as Jews than their predecessors, their devotion to the future of the Jewish people and Judaism is imaginative and great, and the resulting “Jewish content” of the organized Jewish community has increased. But the fact that the Jewish Federations under some sort of centralizing and coordinating body have weakened and have not been replaced by other centralizing bodies is a tragedy.

We are now in a situation where there is tolerance for religious differences within the organized Jewish community, with the representatives of the major denominations most often sitting at the same table. Positions on Israel and international affairs, by contrast, have become the new source of what the rabbis call *sinat hinam*, gratuitously vitriolic and altogether threatening to the welfare of the Jewish people. The debates on “what is good for the Jews” are at times invigorating, but with no center for the many who would like to speak from a centralized address of Jewish life, dangerous acts in the name of American Jewry and values go unchallenged. For example, a Jewish organization with a reputation for support of human rights could shamelessly present a “humanitarian award” to an Indian vice prime minister who is charged with organizing genocidal pogroms against his country’s Muslim minority, with a justification that “it is good for Israel.” Organizations that defended Jews against anti-Semitism could unwisely foment some of the greatest new threats to Jewish security while being oblivious to new attacks from corners that they helped tame. Scarce resources are wasted, members are duped, ideological agendas rather than Jewish values lead with no discussion and no accountability. For that we need a center.

TWO PATHOLOGIES OF ORGANIZED JEWISH LIFE

The failure of the Federations to fix themselves in accordance with the criticisms expressed in 1969, some of which were developed through the Institute for Jewish Life, preserved and intensified two specific pathologies of organized Jewish life that still call for remedy: (1) covenants of irresponsibility that inhibit responsible action and (2) cultures of money that place a disproportionate emphasis on that resource, rather than others, and reward unprincipled action. Calling attention to these pathologies will no doubt anger many Jews, including friends of mine, who have devoted their lives to *tzarkhai tzibbur*, to responding to the needs of the Jewish people with their best intentions and actions and who see the incremental

improvements in Federations as attestations of their successes. But the structures of the Federation movement place an outer limit on reform, and this barrier must be confronted.

How disturbing it is to realize that not one major Jewish development since 1969 has received an initial and ample response from this orbit of Jewish life. Worse yet, Federation organizations often impeded the necessary response and offered resistance to Jews outside the Federation orbit, who would come along and try to “run” with the new issue. The organizational response would be expressed in umbrella organizations with ridiculously small budgets and narrow mandates as an expression of that covenant: “You don’t profit from making this an issue and we will do the same.”

This type of response has been most clearly documented in regard to the rescue of Soviet Jewry. The shameful behavior of major Jewish organizations at the Brussels conference and what followed in early 1970 well illustrate this collusion. How sad I was to join other Soviet Jewry activists demonstrating outside the headquarters of Hadassah, despite the fact that my great-aunt had been one of its founders and early leaders. Hadassah exercised its considerable representational power in the Keren Hayesod, another failed center of Jewish life, using the membership of my mother and grandmother to receive rewards for complying with a minimal response to the Soviet Jewry struggle that would prevent competition. I am absolutely certain that the leaders of Hadassah were certain that they were doing the best for the Jewish people. Likewise, the Federations that failed in their leadership roles could not muster the analytical power to resist the marching orders coming from Jerusalem that did not always directly support advocacy for a mass exodus of Soviet Jews or take advantage of American Jewish influence in Washington and in the media. I was not the only Soviet Jewry activist who received late-night calls from third secretaries of Israeli consulates with threats such as “I will order my Government to destroy you, you and all of your people.”

These covenants of irresponsibility continue to this day—again, I emphasize, supported by people with the best intentions—in response to the problems of minorities in Israel. Not granting members of Israeli minorities equal rights and opportunities violates Jewish values and poses a danger to the future of Israel as both a democratic and Jewish state. Yet after decades of action on the part of family foundations and new small Jewish organizations, as well as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), leaders in the orbit of the Jewish Federations as well as some foundations are responding to this danger with only two initiatives, with budgets about the size of a middle-sized American synagogue. By doing that, they accomplish little more than raising and then frustrating expectations among Israeli Arabs and other minorities, 20% of Israel’s population, and those who could provide bridges for peace to the Palestinians and other Israeli neighbors. This organizational behavior provides neither a center nor does it inspire leadership.

A comparable organizational flaw in which many well-intentioned people and devoted Jews play a significant role is the creation of a culture of money that distorts so much of Jewish life. Granted, someone has to pay the bills, and those who pay the bills often have strong opinions and needs that must be responded to. Indeed, another consequence of the Federations’ inability to fix things has

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been a loss of major donors, who have gone on to establish independent foundations and have contributed to decentralized decision making, largely in positive but often in not so positive ways. When some major donors remove more of their philanthropic activities from the Federation orbit, they leave “tips” behind them: sizable endowments that can cover administrative costs of Federations in future generations and make them even more immune to pressures for participation and for subjecting decisions to explicit considerations of Jewish values and the needs of different groups of Jews. But the cost of Jewish living—Jewish education and summer camps, the premium paid for kosher food, and all that topped by significant monetary donations to Jewish organizations as a requirement for participation and leadership, rather than piety, learnedness, or activism that entail time as much as money—makes Jewish dignity costly as well.

As a community we have surrendered one of the most venerable and regulating concepts of Jewish life—*hilul hashem*, the desecration of God’s name: this concept has at least as much to do with Jewish safety as with how we honor the God of Israel. In less politically correct spots of the world than Manhattan, not only Jews and the Jewish people were humiliated and endangered by that unmentionable scoundrel, Bernard Madoff. Jewish organizations were weakened by the decreased capacity of his victims who were their donors, as well as through his embezzlement of their funds. Our eyes should have been opened to a sad reality. It was a Yeshiva University undergraduate, interviewed by a *New York Times* reporter the day after the scandal broke, who somewhat whimsically gave this reality its clearest articulation by saying that the Jewish community created Madoff by placing so much emphasis on fundraising. This culture of money is an abomination, but, I would add, by no means an aberration. Should this emphasis on earning money—at any cost and by any means for *kavod*, for participation on boards and in leadership—continue, we will generate many more unscrupulous people who will also introduce their questionable sense of morality and governance into the organizational culture of Jewish like. When I stand in the synagogue on the High Holidays and hear the words of the prophets condemning those who rob widows and orphans, a very minimal standard for the protection that a community should offer, I want to know that my community is concerned with how Isaiah’s warning relates to dubious investments that Jewish leaders peddle. That behavior is not irrelevant to what should be the concerns of the centers of Jewish life.

The dream may have died, but the dreamers are ever present. As we read Gary Rosenblatt’s report about this lost center so many years later, we are not sure how many excellent Jewish schoolteachers the Institute for Jewish Life might have generated, nor do we know how it might have balanced centralized authority and broadly based participation, the support of Jewish values and the support of a pluralistic environment, the conflicting demands of leaders who contributed money, time, or reflectiveness to support the security and creativity of all Jews. But it sure would have been worth the try.