

## The Jewish Community in Change: Challenge to Professional Practice\*

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*When one looks at American Jewish life, circa 1981, what is surprising is not the erosion through apathy, assimilation, and intermarriage; these trends are what Jews have been predicting for the last two centuries. What is remarkable is the evidence of Jewish renewal. . .*

I am always a little diffident about giving a keynote address to practitioners, who are on the line, know the problems of Jewish life in a way that is closed off to those, like myself, who study what is happening without the responsibility for action.

I would be less than honest, however, if I did not confess that I think there are certain advantages in my role, as well. Because I have an opportunity to study Jewish life in depth, in what may seem to others, if not to me, to be a leisurely fashion, I may be able to gain the kind of perspective that is hard to come by when you are on the firing line every day.

I would like to use that perspective tonight—first, by identifying what seem to me to be the most important changes affecting American Jewish life, and then by discussing what seem to me to be the most important implications of these changes for Jewish communal workers.

A good place to start is with a joke that is making the rounds of the Jewish community. As the story goes, two men who had not seen each other for a while met and began to chat, “mazel tov,” the first man said; “I hear your daughter is marrying a businessman,”

“What do you mean, a ‘businessman?’” the second man replied, “He’s not just a businessman; he’s President of IBM—the first Jew ever to be President of IBM!”

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“Ah, I’m sorry, I forgot,” the first man remarked, “But tell me: before this, wasn’t your daughter married to a doctor?”

“What do you mean, a ‘doctor?’” the second replied, “He wasn’t just a doctor; he was Chairman of the Department of Medicine at Johns Hopkins Medical School—the first Jew ever to hold that position!”

“Ah, I’m sorry, I forgot, the first man responded. “I’m trying to remember; before that wasn’t she married to a lawyer?”

“What do you mean, a ‘lawyer?’ He wasn’t just a lawyer; he was President of Harvard Law Review, and he clerked on the Supreme Court!”

“Isn’t it wonderful!” the first man marveled. “So much *nachas* from just one child!”

The joke says a great deal about the ferment in American Jewish life, a ferment that has both positive and negative aspects.

The ferment grows out of a profound change that has occurred in the position of Jews in American society in the last twenty or twenty-five years, a change that makes the environment of American Jewish life in the 1980s wholly unlike anything that any Jewish community has ever faced before. The essence of that change is that American society has broken open to Jews in ways that were not expected—indeed, in ways that could not even have been imagined—a generation ago. I do not have time to describe the breakthroughs one by one; the end result is that although pockets of discrimination remain here and there, virtually every occupation and almost every position

in American society is now open to American Jews, from the presidency of the Dupont Corporation and Columbia University to the chairmanship of the Texas State Democratic Committee and the Democratic National Committee. To put it simply, we American Jews live in a freer, more open society than any in which Jews have ever lived before.

This change in opportunity has been accompanied by an equally profound change in attitude; American Jews perceive themselves and their position in American society differently now than they did in my childhood. "Before the beginning of the 19th century all Jews regarded Judaism as a privilege," Mordecai Kaplan wrote in the opening sentence of *Judaism as a Civilization*, published in 1934; "since then most Jews have come to regard it as a burden."

Harry Austryn Wolfson, the first person to hold a chair in Jewish Studies at Harvard, put it more colorfully, "All men are not born equal," Wolfson wrote. "some are born blind, some deaf, some lame, and some are born Jews." Just as the blind, the deaf, and the lame have come to terms with their handicaps and make the best of them, Wolfson went on to tell Jewish college students, so Jews should accept their handicap: "Are we willing to submit to Fate, or shall we foolishly struggle against it?"

To my children's generation, however, Judaism appears to be an option, rather than a burden. American Jews in their 20s and 30s do not consider themselves to be the prisoners of fate; they see themselves as free to choose, to choose whether or not to be Jewish.

The magnitude of the change hit me some fourteen years ago, when we celebrated our third son's tenth birthday by bringing him and his three brothers to Washington for the weekend. A friend had arranged for Jeff and his brothers to meet then-Vice President Hubert Humphrey. Mr. Humphrey was warm and gracious, and brought us into the Vice President's

ceremonial office, a cavernous room off the Senate chamber, which contained all of the trophies he had accumulated in a lifetime of public service. My wife and I and the two older boys were chatting with the Vice President at one end of the room, and Jeff wandered off on his own. Suddenly, in the piercing tones of an uninhibited ten-year old, I heard Jeff call out, "Hey, Dad, come look at the Torah in the showcase here!" As he said it, I realized that with all of the piety and ritual of my Orthodox upbringing, I could not have called out to my father in that way if my life had depended on it. Instead, had I been in that situation, I would have sidled up to my father, tugged on his coat to get his attention, and whispered, "Hey, Dad, look at the Torah in the showcase."

The total absence of inhibition my son displayed reflects a profound generational difference—one that provides us with both an opportunity and a challenge. When young Jews freely choose to be Jewish, they do so with a seriousness and thoughtfulness and creativity that were absent in my generation, no matter how *frum* or committed we were. This new element of seriousness and creativity makes possible a revitalization of Jewish life in the United States.

That same lack of self-consciousness, however, creates a new threat to Jewish survival, that of apathy and indifference. Since the beginning of Emancipation in the 18th century, Jewish leaders have *feared* an open society as much as they have welcomed and even fought for it. Fear of an open society reflected a failure of nerve, a belief that only anti-Semitism can keep Jews Jewish. At the heart of the Zionist doctrine of *shlilat hagolah*, the negation of the Diaspora, in fact, lies the conviction that Judaism is inherently inferior to modern Western culture, that given freedom of choice, Western (and especially American) Jews are bound to abandon Judaism.

I think that view is wrong. After Ausch-

witz, modernity looks a lot less attractive, and Judaism a lot more attractive, than they did a generation ago. Instead of seeing modernity as the norm (or ideal) to which Judaism has to be adjusted, young Jews today are trying to find accommodations between Judaism and modernity on terms approximating equality. Hence the seriousness, creativity, and vitality to which I have already referred.

In short, I see the glass as half full, rather than half empty. Given the gloomy prognostications of the past, what is remarkable is not how much erosion there is, but how little. What needs explanation is the stubborn insistence on remaining Jewish that American Jews display.

But the glass is still only *half* full. If I reject the gloomy prognostications of those who insist that Judaism cannot survive an open society, I also acknowledge that its survival is by no means guaranteed. Precisely because indifference is now an option, survival, let alone vitality, are not automatic.

Let me focus, then, on some of the problems that need addressing if the glass is to become all (or even three-quarters) full. I want to concentrate, in particular, on some of the unintended consequences of the open society in which we live. Take the question of mobility. American Jews are more upwardly mobile than any other group in American society. We are also more geographically mobile; except for some segments of the Orthodox community, we are less rooted in neighborhood and community than any other group; we change our residences more often. Thus, the National Jewish Population Survey found that in 1970, only 62 percent of the Jewish population age 20 and over were still living in the same city in which they had resided four years earlier. And mobility almost certainly has increased since 1970, for the great shift of Jews from the downtown areas of large cities to the suburbs—the change that dominated Jewish life in

the 1950s and '60s—is now being supplemented by a shift of Jews from the old areas of settlement in the East and Midwest to the so-called Jewish crescent, the area that runs from Miami to Houston to Los Angeles and up to Seattle.

It would be hard to exaggerate the impact that geographic mobility has had, and continues to have, on Jewish life—on the nature of family relationships, the role of the community, and the process of socialization into Jewish life. I can illustrate it through the experience of my own family. My wife and I moved to the suburbs in 1951, when our first child was six months old; we did not have the good sense to return to Manhattan until 1978, when our fourth and youngest son was in college.

When I was a child, I lived within walking distance (or at most, a nickel bus ride) of seven of my mother's eight sisters and brothers. A widowed aunt lived with us; my grandmother and my father's unmarried sister and two bachelor brothers had dinner with us several nights each week. Shabbat afternoons were usually spent visiting great aunts and uncles.

When my children were young, they were not in walking distance of *any* relatives. We lived in Nassau County; my brother in Westchester; my wife's sister lived at the Jersey shore before moving, first to Florida, then to Atlanta; my wife's brother lived in Queens, and then in Westchester; our parents lived in Manhattan.

Among the fourth generation, my children's generation, there are some 27 men and women who are out of college (this is just on my mother's side); only nine of them live anywhere in the New York metropolitan area, and they are spread through seven counties. Of the rest, one lives in Japan, seven in California, three in Boston, two in Florida, others in Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Cleveland, and Eugene, Oregon. It is not surprising that the very concept of "family" in its extended sense of my childhood, not just the reality, has disappeared.

When we speak of family in my family, we mean the nuclear family, augmented by *machatonim*. That is the family unit; we are a very close knit family, but it is a different kind of family than the one in which I grew up. Nobody planned it that way, but it happened, and it has a lot of consequences for one's sense of relationship not just to family, but to the Jewish community.

Mobility has also meant the disappearance of neighborhood in the the old urban *shetl* sense, except in a few Orthodox communities.

In the suburbs and in the Sunbelt, and most Sunbelt cities are really aggregations of suburbs, residential areas are separated from business areas; it is hard even to think of a Jewish neighborhood in a shopping mall.

Jews are also spread too thinly to support the kinds of Jewish bakeries, butcher shops, grocery stores and delicatessens, restaurants, and book stores, that were part of the character of the West Side of Manhattan in which I grew up, and the West Side of Manhattan was highly acculturated, compared to much of Brooklyn and the Bronx. The result is that the neighborhoods in which Jews now live by and large lack any ethnic character at all. With a few notable exceptions, Pikesville, for example, or Boro Park, or the condominiums of Florida's "Gold Coast," or the new communities of young Orthodox Jews springing up around the country, Jewish neighborhoods are simply indistinguishable from other neighborhoods, except perhaps at Chanukah time or Christmas time. Thus, a second major support to Jewish identity has been removed.

The loss of that support was obscured for a long time. Having grown up in Jewish neighborhoods, my generation remained hungry for Jewish associations when we left our Jewish neighborhoods in the 1950s and '60s. Hence we joined, and built, synagogues and Jewish community centers. We wanted physical association with other

Jews; we also wanted, psychiatrists might say, we needed, to make a statement with our buildings, to announce to the Gentile world that we had arrived.

I do not mean to sound invidious when I suggest that we frequently were more concerned with the architecture, with making that statement to the Gentile world, than with the content of what went on inside. We didn't *have* to be concerned with what went on inside. We knew we were Jewish; we *felt* Jewish. And so playing volleyball or handball with other Jews, giving to UJA and Federation, or attending an occasional meeting of the American Jewish Committee or B'nai B'rith, or Hadassah, or Women's Ort, were enough to reinforce our sense of Jewishness.

It no longer is enough. A new generation is growing up without that visceral sense of Jewishness that members of my generation acquired without even trying, by virtue of growing up in the families and neighborhoods in which we were raised. If we are to attract and hold this generation, a generation for whom Judaism appears to be an option, rather than a fate, magnificent community centers and temples are not enough. Indeed, they may be downright counterproductive; many young people appear to be turned off by large, impersonal institutions—and the cost of maintaining those huge edifices necessarily reduces the number of dollars available for the kind of educational, cultural and religious programs we now need. I will talk about those needs in a minute: first, let me discuss the unintended consequences of some other forms of mobility, of which the professionalization of the Jewish labor force is, perhaps, the most important example.

Increasingly, Jews are shifting from entrepreneurial activity, from being self-employed businessmen to being self-employed or, with growing frequency, *employed* professionals. This, in turn, accelerates geographic mobility. For certain kinds of paid professionals, corporate

managers, scientists, engineers, operations researchers, and the like, promotion often means transfer to another city. People who see the community in which they live as a stopping-off place in between promotions are understandably reluctant to make the commitment of time, money and self that is needed for community involvement.

The professionalization of the Jewish labor force affects communal life in another, more profound way. Discussion of the consequences of professionalization has tended to focus on its direct impact on levels of giving, which is to say, on the fact that businessmen are able to contribute out of capital (or out of hidden earnings), whereas professionals give out of income. I think that this consequence is exaggerated; in the communities I have studied so far, lawyers and doctors are likely to have business interests in addition to their professional practices.

The main impact of professionalization is more subtle and indirect: it affects the level of giving by affecting the number of volunteers and the intensity of their commitment to Jewish communal life. For reasons that lie deep in the Jewish psyche, Jewish businessmen seem to suffer from what sociologists call status anxiety: to feel that they are *really* successful, they need the status and prestige—the identity, if you will—that comes from deep involvement in Jewish life.

Jewish professionals do not have the same need; they tend to get their sense of self, their identity, from their professional activity and from their relationships with their professional peers; they have less need for the *koved* that Jewish organizational activity provides, and less time.

The change is even more dramatic in the case of women, because a double shift is going on, a shift from non-employment or part-time employment to full-time employment, and a shift from having a job to pursuing a career—in particular, a professional career. Thus, Jewish women have

less and less need for organizations, and they have less and less time to devote to them. American Jewish life has existed for a century in essence on the coolie labor provided by Jewish women. That labor is less and less available, and American Jewish organizations are barely beginning to come to terms with the significance of that change.

The result is a rapid fall-off in affiliation rates. In his study of the process of suburbanization in the 1950s and '60s, Marshall Sklare found that between 80 and 90 per cent of Jews in the community he called Lakeville belonged to at least one Jewish organization. This high rate of affiliation was a function of being uncomfortable, or feeling unwelcome or strange, in suburbia; the people in question had left familiar Jewish neighborhoods for suburbs that had a WASP character and were under WASP control.

Studies of Jewish affiliation today show drastically lower rates of affiliation. In Los Angeles, a recent census directed by Bruce Phillips found that, among third and fourth generation Jews, affiliation rates were down to 25 per cent or thereabouts. Only about 25 per cent of young Jews had some formal affiliation with just one Jewish organization.

The professionalization of the Jewish labor force has profound demographic consequences as well. It means that young people postpone the age at which they marry, if, indeed they marry at all; the proportion of Jews in their 20s and 30s who have never married is extraordinarily high. And single people tend to be less involved in Jewish life than their married peers.

When Jews do marry, moreover, the families are likely to be two-career families, as opposed to two-job families. For women, in particular, there is a profound difference between holding a job and having a career. The most immediate consequence is that couples postpone the age at which they have their first child, if, indeed,

they have any children at all. And the later the age at which women bear their first child, the fewer the number of children they are likely to have. One result is that the Jewish birth rate has fallen well below the rate needed for Zero Population Growth. A second consequence is that we are an aging population.

There is nothing we can do to change either demographic trend. The organized Jewish community has come to recognize the fact that the low birth rate is a serious threat to Jewish survival; unfortunately, efforts to reverse the trend, to persuade young people to have more children, are doomed to failure. Instead, we need to ask other questions: How can we make it possible for two-career families with children to live Jewish (and Jewishly involved) lives? How can we make it possible for single and divorced men and women to do the same? Most important, how can we attract young Jews, single or married, to Judaism; how can we persuade them to *want* to live Jewish and Jewishly involved lives?

I don't pretend to know the answers, although I am convinced that they do not lie in doing more of the same. New answers are crucial because of the sea-changes to which I have already referred: the fact that for the generation of Jews in their 20s and 30s, Judaism appears to be an option, rather than a fate, and the fact that large numbers are opting out of Jewish life through apathy or indifference.

New answers are needed for another reason: the religious component of Jewish identity will be vastly more important to Jewish communal life in the future than it has been at any time in the recent past. Young Jews have so many options in this open society that only those who take their Judaism seriously are likely to be involved in Jewish communal life. The change is already visible—witness Steven M. Cohen's findings about the increased influence religious involvement now exerts on Jewish

philanthropy. In 1965, Professor Cohen found, religious Jews were only 11 percent more likely to give to the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Boston; by 1975, the religious influence on giving had grown by a factor of five, i.e., religious Jews were 56 percent more likely to give than non-religious Jews. The younger the Jews, moreover, the greater the influence.

In the past, philanthropy and other forms of Jewish communal activity were fueled by two powerful forces: noblesse oblige toward Eastern European Jews on the part of thoroughly assimilated German Jews; and more recently, nostalgia on the part of the descendants of those Eastern European Jews. The first factor played itself out some time ago, and the second is exhausting itself fairly rapidly, for the reasons I have described.

Jewish communal organizations have been living off the Jewish capital bequeathed us by our parents and grandparents; that capital stock is approaching exhaustion. To put it in sociological rather than economic terminology, Jewish communal life in the United States has rested on a bedrock of "extrinsic" cultural patterns—ethnic styles of eating, dressing, speaking, and vacationing. Those extrinsic cultural traits are disappearing, and Jewish life depends increasingly on what Milton Gordon calls "intrinsic" cultural traits, of which religious beliefs and practices are the most important.

The exhaustion of our stock of Jewish capital, the disappearance of extrinsic cultural patterns, has been obscured by the extraordinary symbolic role that Israel has played in American Jewish life. For American Jews my age and older, as Professor Charles Liebman has pointed out, Israel has served as a surrogate for the *shtetl*; in a curious mythical way, it has become the old homeland, the land of our parents or grandparents. But Jews in their 20s and 30s have no need for a surrogate "old country;" their parents and grandparents were born

in the United States, and for them, America really is home.

Israel's symbolic role in American Jewish life is likely to decline for another reason. For Jews my age and older, as Liebman also points out, Israel symbolizes the Jewish people's capacity for rebirth and renewal; it helps expiate the guilt we feel for our silence during the Holocaust. But Jews in their 20s and 30s do not have that sense of guilt. Hence they have less need for (and are less likely to respond to) this symbolic use (or misuse) of Israel and the Holocaust.

Equally important, young Jews have always stood tall. Because they have never felt inferior or ashamed of their Jewishness, because they have never felt (or known) the need to be deferential to non-Jews, they have less need for the vicarious sense of potency and strength that Israel's military exploits and its day-to-day existence provide to older Jews.

Lest I be misunderstood, let me emphasize what I am *not* saying. I am not saying that Israel is irrelevant or unimportant to American Jewish life; to the contrary, commitment to Israel is a necessary part of Jewish identity. By itself, however, it is insufficient. UJA and Federations have done an extraordinary job of using the magic of Israel to draw otherwise uncommitted Jews into the tent of *klal Yisrael*; and leadership development programs have had remarkable success in opening young secular Jews up to the magic of Shabbat and other forms of Jewish observance.

Impressive as these achievements are, however, they are not enough. Leadership development programs must learn how to convert the excitement generated by the one-shot weekend retreat into sustained Jewish study and observance. Jewish community centers must become centers of Jewish culture and learning. Federations must learn how to convert the drain of talent and intellect from synagogues and other Jewish institutions into a two-way

movement. Every institution must explore ways of reaching the unaffiliated and of activating the inactive.

I recognize that it is easier to say what should be done than to explain how to go about doing it. If I emphasize purpose rather than technique, it is because I share the conviction Leonard Fein expressed in his keynote address to last year's Conference meeting: "the principal threat to Jewish survival" is neither powerlessness nor the lures of an open society, but what he calls "Jewish purposelessness."

I end on a hopeful note. When one looks at American Jewish life, circa 1981, what is surprising is not the erosion through apathy, assimilation, and inter-marriage; these trends are what Jews have been predicting for the last two centuries. What is remarkable is the evidence of Jewish renewal. The vitality of Orthodox Judaism; the growth of the Havurah movement; the explosion of Jewish studies and programs on college campuses; the burgeoning interest in Jewish art, music, and drama; the emergence of a new breed of Jewish educator such as those belonging to CAJE (The Conference on Alternatives in Jewish Education); the *baal teshuvah* phenomenon in the broadest possible sense (Charles Liebman defines a *baal teshuvah* as any one of college age or older who is more observant than his or her parents, teachers, or high school peers would have predicted); the growth of what Max Vorspan calls "public sector Judaism" (the tendency of secular Jews to participate in public religious observances)—none of these could have been predicted (and few could even have been imagined) twenty-five or thirty years ago.

I am hopeful for another reason: our fear of an open society, of contact with other cultures, has little warrant in Jewish history. As Jacob Neusner has pointed out, the history of Judaism is the history of the assimilation by the Jews of the cultural, social and religious traits characteristic of

their neighbors." Gerson Cohen has made the same point in a brilliant paper on "The Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History." Traditionally, Jews have handled the problem of assimilation in one of two ways: by withdrawing; or by using assimilation as a new source of vitality. "The great ages of Jewish creativity," Dr. Cohen writes, "have always been products of the challenge of assimilation and of the response of leaders who were, to a certain extent, assimilated themselves." To a considerable degree, the Jews survived as a vital group and as a pulsating culture because they changed their names, their language, their clothing and with them some of their patterns of thought and expression. This ability to translate, to readapt and reorient themselves to new situations, while retaining a basic inner core of continuity, was largely responsible" for Jewish vitality, if not for Jewish survival itself.

I conclude with a favorite *midrash* about the Biblical account of the parting of the Red Sea. According to the text (Exodus

XIV, 23), *Vahyavouh v'nai yisrael b'toch hayam bahyahbahshah*, "And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry ground." How could both parts of the statement be true, the Rabbis asked: if the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea, how could the ground be dry; and if they stepped on dry ground, how could they be in the midst of the sea? The answer, according to the *Midrash*, is that it was not until the Israelites stepped into the sea that the waters parted and they were able to reach dry ground. It was their action—their willingness to step into the water, in short—that caused the miracle. Or to put it in Reconstructionist terminology, their action *was* the miracle. The lesson is clear enough: what happens to Judaism and Jewish communal life in the United States depends, in good measure, on what we do. In the words of *Pirke Abot*, "It is not incumbent upon us to complete the task; but neither are we free to desist from doing all that we possibly can."