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In recent years, the "non-denominational" or even "non-sectarian" Jewish community center has been the subject of much controversy. The nature of the relationship of the Orthodox community vis à vis an avowedly religiously neutral institution is discussed in the following exchange between Professor Charles Liebman, who teaches political science at Yeshiva University, and Graenum Berger, consultant on community centers and camps to the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York.

ORTHODOXY AND THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER

*The Jewish Community Center: A Fourth Force in American Jewish Life** is a collection of speeches delivered by Graenum Berger to various meetings, mostly of Jewish Center people, from 1940 to the present. Berger is an articulate defender of Jewish Community Centers because he is also a capable critic. His basic position is that the Jewish Center movement must assume the function of teaching "Jews how to live as Jews in the United States of America" (p. 14, also p. 160). It is clear to Berger that the Centers have not even accepted their responsibility for this function, much less performed it adequately.

Readers will be particularly interested in two essays. One, "The Jewish Center as a Fourth Force in American Jewish Life," is both a defense of the center and an excellent critique of the synagogue. The "fourth force" to which the title refers is of course in contradistinction to the three synagogue forces, Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reform. A second essay "Religion and Social Work" presented as part of Yeshiva University's School of Social Work lecture series, is also of particular interest and evokes, at least from me, a great deal of sympathy.

Mr. Berger is obviously sympathetic to religion and not entirely removed from a knowledge of Torah. This makes all the

* by Graenum Berger, New York. Jewish Education Committee Press, 1966.

more dramatic the enormous gulf that separates him in his assumptions about the role of religion and the centrality of Torah in Jewish life from someone like myself whose Jewish education may, possibly, be inferior to his. If the reader will forgive a personal note: I was touched and warmed by Berger's obvious sincerity and commitment to Judaism and his struggle for Jewish values within the Center movement, but I was struck by the difficulty I would have in communicating to him the unacceptability of even *his* Jewish program for myself or my children. I will cite only one illustration. In a paper delivered to the Social Work Alumni Association of Yeshiva University on "Implications of Sabbath Programing for the Jewish Community Center" Berger says:

> . . . until the various denominations in American Judaism get together and establish one authority, I believe that it is justifiable for a major American Jewish institution with hundreds of units and hundreds of thousands of members to consider itself an enterprise equally capable of doing its own thinking in what we deem to be a Jewish pluralistic society.
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> Would I include Rabbis on this body, I would say no, if they are there as professionals or as representatives of synagogues or synagogue collectives. Centers don't need an inside picket. However, if they can see themselves as individual Jewish citizens acting with other educated Jews, then my answer might be different. But I do not think the Center should turn to a Rabbi or a rabbinical group for such sanction (p. 83).

Berger's argument is clear and cogent in the light of Western assumptions about the meaning of religious freedom, pluralism, and democracy. How would I convey to Mr. Berger, a man who represents, as it were, a religious right wing within his own profession, my rejection of these assumptions for determining Sabbath programming and at the same time continue a meaningful dialogue with him. And if I cannot talk to Berger, what chance do I have with the more typical Center Worker who is both ignorant of and indifferent to positive yet sectarian Jewish values.

Berger, himself, does not shy away from the values of sectarianism (see p. 170ff.). To him, however, sectarianism

means Jewish as opposed to non-Jewish. But, here again, he represents a minority voice in the Center movement, and even Berger believes that the Jewish Center should be open to non-Jews. How then shall I communicate with him? I do not know the answer to this. I would, however, like to devote the remainder of the essay to a question which must assume priority. Should the Orthodox community make the effort to communicate? This is written against the backdrop of an increasing militancy among religious leaders, particularly Conservative Rabbis, against secular Jewish organizations such as Jewish Community Centers. (See, for example, Jack Shechter, "Primer For A Revolution," [*Conservative Judaism,* Winter, 1966, pp. 17-31] which begins, "Religious Jewry and the organized Jewish community at large are in conflict." Or, Jacob Neusner, "Conservative Judaism in a Divided Community" [*Conservative Judaism,* Summer, 1966, 1-19]).

Statistics on the proportion of American Jews affiliated with any type of Synagogue are difficult to obtain, sometimes unreliable, and often misleading. From official estimates I would say that somewhere between 50% and 60% of American Jews are identified with some synagogue, but I am impressed by the fact that some Rabbis in suburban areas report their guess that no more than 20% of the families in their communities attended any service at all on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. A very rough estimate for Washington Heights indicates that no more than 40% to 50% of the Jewish heads of households are reached in any way by any synagogue, and the proportion may be much less. This in an area that is saturated with synagogues and is thought to be intensely Jewish. In an era when church affiliation is "American" and even non-Jewish social pressures tend to support synagogue identification, vast numbers of Jews remain untouched by the synagogue. By any quantitative measure, the synagogue has failed. At the very least, it may be argued, we should be open to alternative ways of reaching Jews. It is true that Jewish Community Centers have not fared significantly better than the synagogue. With approximately three quarters of a million members, a considerable number of whom are synagogue members (in New

York City estimated at 33% and outside New York even higher), their total membership is about equal to that of the Orthodox synagogue membership, and falls somewhat below the official figures for the Conservative and Reform. However, Center officials estimate that their programs reach at least as many non-members as members.

On the other hand, many Jewish Community Centers reach a group to whom our synagogues have become almost entirely alien. I refer to the elderly, to the physically and emotionally handicapped, and to others requiring social work services. The argument is not that Jewish Community Centers are doing a particulary good job. Rather, they have at least reached a segment of the population which the synagogues have not. Is it not important then to work with and through Community Centers, to seek to transform them Jewishly, and utilize them as a vehicle for Torah? Is the Rabbi's role to administer an institution or teach Torah? And what if the synagogue is not the best place to teach Torah? The transformation of almost any Jewish institution today is hardly impossible. The shortage of a committed working laity and competent professionals is so great that the job can be done rather expeditiously assuming even a small cadre of dedicated workers, who in some areas are prepared to work with, if in others against, the present leadership groups.

But, one might argue, why bother? If the synagogue has failed to touch many Jews, why not seek to transform the synagogue. Why must we necessarily communicate and work with non-synagogue institutions which to some extent compete for members and money with the synagogue? Is there any intrinsic advantage to Jewish Community Centers? The answer is, I think, a qualified "yes," at least for the Orthodox Jew.

In most areas Orthodox synagogues that seek to remain true to their convictions cannot become very large. This is true for two important reasons. First, in single family residential neighborhoods a synagogue is unlikely to be within walking distance of more than 100 Orthodox families. It seems that one obvious measure of a rabbi's success is the number of families he has made into Sabbath observers. This means he must discourage

riding to the synagogue on Sabbath and perforce adjust himself to a community pattern of small Orthodox synagogues with limited facilities.

Secondly, the nature of an Orthodox Jew's commitment means he is more concerned and involved with the religious aspects of a synagogue than a Conservative or Reform Jew. The concomitant is the greater difficulty in finding a religious service to satisfy many Orthodox Jews. Some want *nusach Sfard* and others *nusach Ashkenaz;* some want a decorous formal service, others a more fervent and emotional service; some want a relatively large *minyan* and others prefer a smaller group. Whatever the differences, areas with large concentrations of Orthodox Jews find that even two or three synagogues are insufficient to satisfy their needs.

Both these points mean that Orthodox synagogues will be too small to provide adequate cultural, recreational, and educational programs for their own adults and children. Many Orthodox synagogues ignore the problem of youth education because so many of their members send their children to day schools. But not everyone does, nor can the Orthodox shirk their obligation to provide at least a minimal Torah education for others.

What the foregoing suggests is that the Orthodox, more so even than the Conservative or Reform, need a large centralized Jewish Community Center to provide the services which are unavailable in any small Orthodox synagogue. The fact that Orthodox Rabbis do not feel a pressure from their congregants to provide such services is irrelevant. The Rabbi ought to make his congregants feel more keenly the need of these services.

It goes without saying that the nature of a centralized facility may have to be radically different from present Community Centers. Such Centers are needed because they would involve the American Jew more directly in Jewish life and would relate non-sectarian activities such as recreation to a Jewish context. But, if one is convinced that such Centers are necessary, one must come to terms with the already existing institutions organized to function along these lines. For the small Orthodox synagogue the Center can be a complementary rather than a competing institution.

There is a second argument for the necessity of Orthodoxy to communicate with Jewish Community Center people and arrive at mutual understanding, if not agreement and accommodation. Orthodoxy cannot reach a majority of American Jews today. We are pleased that Orthodox youth with day school backgrounds no longer abandon tradition as they did twenty and thirty years ago. We take pride in the number of college students and young adults who come from non-Orthodox homes and have become *ba'ale teshuvah.* Orthodoxy probably commands the allegiance of a greater proportion of intellectual Jews, particularly on university faculties, than does Conservatism, Reform or any single secular Jewish organization. Nominal membership among other groups may possibly be larger, but we command a real devotion among our intellectuals that no other group can equal.

This is our pride. But what are we talking about numerically? Four or five thousand college students, a few thousand *ba'ale teshuvah,* a few hundred Ph.D's, — a drop in the bucket. Orthodoxy cannot reach the masses of American Jews because they have no resonance for its message. Their total outlook on life, their values, their perceptions, their desires, are incompatible with Orthodox belief and practice. Certainly with better technique, with greater zeal, with more money and primarily with more understanding, Orthodoxy could reach many more Jews. No doubt there are restless searching souls among Conservative, Reform, and non-affiliated Jews who rightfully belong in our camp, but not many. Unless we are prepared to accommodate ourselves to a basic change in belief and practice, we can do little more than hold our own. But if this is the case, must we not ask what is to become of the majority of American Jewry. Perhaps we must in some way come to terms with non-Orthodox institutions and recognize their function as at least a holding operation in the face of the threat of assimilation. If we pray that someday the Jewish community in America will return to Torah must we not make certain that there will be some members of that community to return? Does this not mean, therefore, at least a tacit understanding with such agencies as a Jewish Community Center in order to communicate our point of view

and perhaps make the best of what is admittedly a bad situation?

It strikes me that there are a number of compelling arguments to the contrary. First, on what basis can we communicate with Center people? What is the basic value level upon which agreement can be reached and from where we can proceed to an understanding and respect for our mutual differences? Taking the Center literature as a guide, the basic value we share is a commitment to "Jewish Survival." But Jewish survival has a very different meaning to us and to most non-sectarian Jewish leaders today. To the Orthodox it means survival of Jews committed to Judaism in its traditional form. To the non-sectarian Jew it means survival of Jews with a commitment to that which is nominally defined as Judaism. With the latter definition, the easiest path to survival is a continuing redefinition of the content and nature of Judaism. From the point of view of the irreligious Jew, Orthodoxy is an obstacle to survival. Given their definition, we seem prepared to sacrifice the commitment and identification of many American Jews. We seem prepared to see many Jews totally assimilate at the expense of retaining antiquated practices and beliefs. From their point of view we are anti-survivalists and pose a threat to their Jewish, not to mention secular, values.

Does this not imply that any condition of mutual communication and understanding must involve some sacrifice of our basic principles? Would cooperation not lead inevitably to our being forced to redefine and re-evaluate our own basic commitments?

This leads us to another argument against efforts at communication and cooperation. Jewish survivalists, whatever their definition of Judaism, have not been very successful in the United States. Neither the Conservative or Reform movements, not to mention the Jewish Community Centers, have awakened any significant commitment to Jewish survival, much less religious life (in its loosest terms), among their constituents. On the contrary, sociologically speaking, the Jewish community has no assured future in the United States. With the lessening of social pressure for church membership, a new kind of pluralism may well replace the tripartite religious divisions.

Granted that Americans will always require some form of subsocietal affiliation as a channel for identifying with and participating in the larger society, there is no reason to believe that the form of association must be religious. With the breakdown of the family, age groups, for example, appear to be acquiring an increasingly important role. Already the young and the very old have developed associational ties which transcend religious differences and by reinforcing the bifurcation of family life themselves contribute to religious problems. (The family, after all is the major carrier and transmitter of the religious tradition, particularly among Jews.) Occupational pluralism is an even more potent association form. Increasingly, Americans, at least at the professional and executive level, find their meaning and self-identification from work and work-related groups. This only contributes further to a sense of the irrelevance of religion.

What all this means is that we face the prospect of increasing Jewish indifference on the part of the vast majority of American Jews. American Jews seem to be moving in two different directions. Increasingly, Judaism will retain the identification of only those whose commitment is a very deep one, and those who are willing to pay the high cost of sacrificing age, occupational, or other associational group identities for their Judaism. It seems to me that this can occur only among those who believe that the source of their Jewish identity is transcendent and authoritative. They constitute only a small proportion of the Jewish community whose nucleus lies within American Orthodoxy. From them we may expect increased Jewish identification and sectarianism. But from the majority of American Jews, perhaps most of those who are today affiliated with Reform, Conservative and even Orthodox synagogues, not to mention the Jewish Community Centers, there is no hope. If this argument is correct, then it dictates a social strategy of non-cooperation and of a tightening of our own narrow community. Granted, the boundary lines of this community are not coterminous with the Orthodox community. They cut across Orthodoxy, but encompass only a handful of the rest of American Jews.

Nevertheless, a question remains. Ought the traditional community to choose a socially or sociologically dictated strategy? The answer is that we ourselves are lost unless our activity is governed by Torah, Halakhah, and theology. Surely, we are best advised to turn to our own religious tradition to dictate the choice among our alternatives. Those of us who believe that our religious tradition dictates involvement may be obligated to pursue this alternative even where social and political considerations suggest other directions.