

The Geography of American Jewish Communal Life

Daniel J. Elazar

It has become increasingly clear to those who concern themselves with the affairs of the American Jewish community that Jewish activity in the United States is predominately local activity. Whatever the great country-wide and international purposes that motivate Jews to associate with one another for common purposes, the locus of their association remains within the local community. On one hand, most activities from fund raising to synagogue participation are conducted within the local arena; on the other hand, even those activities that are country-wide in scope are conducted through representatives of local organizations or federations of local bodies.

Knowing this, it then becomes important to understand the way in which American Jews are dispersed around the United States and how their country-wide dispersion is organized from locality to locality.

American Jewry is the largest Jewish community in Jewish history and, indeed, with close to six million Jews, is the largest aggregation of Jews ever located under a single government, with the possible exception of Czarist Russia on the eve of the mass migration. Its major local communities are larger than all but a handful of country-wide communities in the past.

The spread of Jews from coast

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to coast and from far North to deep South, despite its unevenness, has given the Jewish community major concentrations of populations at the farthest reaches of the country. Moreover, the density of Jewish population in the Northeast has been declining at least since the end of World War II. California now has more Jews than any country in the world other than the United States itself, the Soviet Union, and Israel; Los Angeles, the second largest Jewish population in the world. Greater Miami's Jewish community—the sixth largest in the United States—is approaching the size of that of Brazil and is the fifteenth in the world.*

The five largest Jewish communities in the United States contain close to 60 percent of the total Jewish population and the top 16 communities (all those containing 50,000 Jews or more) contain over 75 percent of the total. At the same time, Jews are distributed in over 800 communities ranging in size from just under two million in New York City down to a handful of families. Those 800 are organized into 225 local federations or their equivalent, of which only 27 have more than twenty thousand Jews and only ten over a hundred thousand. (Greater New York City, while really a region rather than a local community, is organized under a single federation which includes the five boroughs plus Nassau, Suffolk and Westchester counties.)

* All population data used in this article are taken from the *American Jewish Year Book*, except as otherwise noted.

Local community size contributes directly to the organization of decision-making on the American Jewish scene. New York is not only in a size class by itself but maintains its own—highly fragmented—organizational patterns, while holding itself substantially aloof from all other communities. The federation system, which has become the norm throughout the rest of the country, is limited in New York City. The major Jewish institutions and organizations, beginning with the United Jewish Appeal, conduct their own fund raising campaigns and operate their own local programs outside of any overall planning or coordinating framework often from their own national offices.

The major Jewish communities outside of New York are all structured so that the federations play a major, if not dominant, role in communal fund raising and decision-making. All the significant ones among them are members of the Large City Budgeting Conference of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, known as the LCBC. The members of the LCBC include the most powerfully influential communities on the American Jewish scene, and the leaders of its constituent federations are the major source of American Jewry's leadership across the spectrum of functional spheres. Significantly, New York is not a member of the LCBC.

Communities too small or too weak to be members of the LCBC stand on the peripheries of the country-wide decision-making processes, no matter how well-organized and active they may be locally. Occasionally, notable individuals from such communities do attain national prominence, but that is rare. Only in the last few years have the stronger of these communities begun to devise ways to enhance their national visibility in the manner of the LCBC.

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Local decision-making has not been systematically studied in more than a handful of these organized communities. What we do know, however, is that there are variations among the cities in each of the categories simply as a result of the differences in scale that change the magnitude of the communications problems. The ways in which patterns of communication are organized vary in communities of different sizes, not to speak of other cultural, historical, social, and economic factors. Size, for example, does much to determine who knows whom and how comprehensive or exclusive are friendship and acquaintanceship nets. These, in turn, determine who speaks to whom on communal matters.

There is also considerable evidence that the percentage of those affiliated with and active in communal life stands in inverse ratio to community size. Since there is always a certain minimum of positions to be filled, regardless of community size, smaller communities will, ipso facto, involve a greater proportion of their population than larger ones, not to speak of the greater social pressures for participation often manifested in smaller communities where people know who is and who is not participating.

The size factor works in other ways as well. To some extent, the number and spread of Jewish institutions is dependent upon the size of the community. A community of ten thousand Jews is not likely to have the range of institutions of a community of a hundred thousand. Consequently, it will not have the complexity and diversity of decision-making centers or channels, nor the problems of separated leadership that are likely to prevail in a very large community where people can be decision-makers in major arenas without knowing or working with their

counterparts in others.

The impact of size of place also has a dynamic quality. When Jews first came to the American colonies in the 18th century, they lived in a number of small communities of approximately the same size scattered up and down the coast, none of which were able to support more than the most rudimentary of Jewish institutions, namely, synagogues and those activities which could be centered in them. In the first half of the 19th century, the Jews continued this general pattern of spreading out in many small communities but, after mid-century, began to concentrate at a few major points as a result of changing factors on the American scene. The mass migration of Jews from Eastern Europe settled in the very largest cities. At the same time, the Jews in the hinterland communities continued to migrate to those same cities because that is where the opportunities lay. It was then that the Jews became fully identified with the big cities.

Since the end of World War II there has been another shift in the scale of Jewish settlement that is only now beginning to be fully reflected in the structure of local decision-making. The Jews have been moving out of the big cities into suburbs which, while nominally parts of the same metropolitan area, in fact have fully separated governmental structures and substantially distinctive socioeconomic characteristics, both of which they guard jealously. This migration is leading the Jews back once again to small communities where, unless they are involved with a great metropolitan federation, they are able to maintain only the minimum in the way of Jewish institutions, locally. Scattered widely among many small towns, they are tied together at most by a common fundraising system for overseas needs. Although the figures are buried in the way Jewish population esti-

mates are made, it seems that 60 percent of American Jews today live in separate suburban communities of less than twenty thousand Jews.

Nor does the distribution of functions in the Jewish community follow strictly along population lines. New York, with its 31 percent of the American Jewish total, is the de facto capital of the American Jewish community. Moreover, because New York is really a region rather than a community, one which embraces many communities organized in various ways and is additionally surrounded by perhaps another 15 percent of American Jewry living within the orbit of Manhattan, the Jews of that city tend to believe that they are the beginning and end of Jewish life in the United States. At the same time, what would be considered very large Jewish communities in their own right are well-nigh buried within the metropolitan area and maintain only those institutions that meet immediately local needs.

The other very large Jewish communities are regional centers of Jewish life as well as major communities in their own right. Los Angeles is clearly the center of Jewish life west of the Rocky Mountains and the second city of American Jewry institutionally as well as in numbers, with branches of all the country-wide Jewish organizations and institutions located within its limits. Because of its distance from the East Coast it has a greater degree of independence from "New York" than any other regional center in the United States. Chicago is the capital of the Jewries of mid-America in much the same way, although, in its case, relative proximity to New York has prevented it from developing the same range of national institutions or local autonomy as Los Angeles. Once the greater western anchor of American Jewish life, its

overall position has been lost to Los Angeles along with so much of its Jewish population.

Philadelphia and Boston, although now almost within commuting distance of New York, remain equally important secondary national centers for American Jewry because of historical circumstance. Philadelphia's old, established Jewish community has long played a national role that at one time even rivaled that of the Empire City. It continues to maintain some institutions of national significance. Perhaps more important, as the first major Jewish community outside of the New York metropolitan area, its leaders have easy access to the national offices of Jewish organizations where they frequently represent the point of view of the rest of American Jewry (insofar as there is any common one) vis-à-vis that of "New York." Boston Jewry, though a far younger Jewish community, has capitalized on its city's position as the Athens of America to create major Jewish academic institutions of national scope and to become the home of whatever Jewish academic "brain trust" exists in the United States.

Only in the South is the largest city not the regional center. Greater Miami, still a very new community, the product of the post-World War II migration southward and heavily weighted with retirees, has had no significant national impact as a community (as distinct from a location for doing the winter business of American Jewry as a whole). The regional capital of Jewish life in the South is Atlanta, the region's general capital. Despite its small Jewish population of 16,500, it possesses the panoply of regional offices associated with much larger Jewish communities in other parts of the country. The pattern of Jewish activity in Atlanta is markedly different from that of any of the other regional centers because of the intimacy and

proximity within which the regional offices and local institutions must live.

Jewish communities of medium size (here defined as twenty thousand to one hundred thousand population) all play tertiary roles in the hierarchy of American Jewish communities. They are generally able to provide the full range of local institutions and organizations found in any American community, although often in rudimentary form, but serve no particular national functions as communities except as a result of historical accident. At the same time, they contribute many of the most important leaders on the national scene, both professional and voluntary. The table below represents a tentative ranking of the Jewish communities of the United States in terms of their importance on the national scene: Among the tertiary centers, national importance is determined by factors other than size. The subsidiary regional centers are all located between the Mississippi and the Pacific coast where they represent nodes of Jewish population that serve wide areas sparsely settled by Jews and thus occupy a more important role in the overall scheme of things than either their size or, in most cases, the quality of Jewish life within them would otherwise warrant.

The combination of geographic location, community size and place in the hierarchy of Jewish communities, functions to shape local Jewish life as well as the contribution of a particular local community to the American Jewish community as a whole, in both positive and negative ways. On one hand, the overwhelming size of the Jewish community of New York enhances the variety and possibilities for Jewish life there, and, on the other hand, reduces the influence of New York Jewry as a whole on the American scene. Strong concentrations of Jews in communities of the second level make it possible for them to both participate on the national scene and to maintain viable Jewish communities locally. Smaller Jewish communities find it difficult to maintain the variety of Jewish expression that makes for creativity while at the same time are more cohesive when it comes to acting in matters of Jewish concern locally and country-wide. Those Jewish communities with less than 10,000 Jews, unless their geographic situation affects them otherwise, are hard put to survive as communities for other than limited (if often very successful on a proportionate basis) fund raising and synagogal purposes, simply because they cannot draw upon the necessary Jewish talent locally and are

THE HIERARCHY OF ROLES OF AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITIES

National Capitol: New York (Manhattan)

Major Regional Centers (secondary national centers): Los Angeles,* Chicago,* Philadelphia,* Boston,* Atlanta*

Tertiary Centers: Baltimore,* Cincinnati,* Cleveland,* Detroit,* Essex County (Newark),* St. Louis,* San Francisco,* Washington

Subsidiary Regional Centers: Dallas,* Denver,* Kansas City,* Minneapolis*

Significant Local Communities: Phoenix, Oakland, San Diego, Hartford,* New Haven, Indianapolis, Louisville, New Orleans, Springfield (Mass.), St. Paul, Omaha, Atlantic City, Albany, Buffalo,* Rochester,* Syracuse, Columbus,* Pittsburgh,* Providence,* Memphis, Nashville, Houston,* Norfolk, Milwaukee,* Seattle

*Member, Large City Budgeting Conference of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds.

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Recognition of these factors will help explain many of the problematic aspects of Jewish life in the United States today. For example, the statistics showing very high intermarriage rates which have been published in recent years have been drawn, for the most part, from smaller Jewish communities where there is far greater exposure of Jewish young people to non-Jews at marriageable ages and where there is much less in the way of positive forces making for Jewish identity beyond what is normally considered "religious" in the United States. Jewish education in those communities tends to be weak. The synagogue in its most assimilated form tends to be the dominant institution and, even where Jewish community centers may exist, the amount of time they devote to activities of a Jewish nature is minimal. Moreover, what evidence we have shows that Jewish family and home observance is lowest in such communities.

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It is far more difficult to marry outside of the Jewish people in cities like New York, Philadelphia, or Detroit than it is in Indianapolis or Des Moines or Davenport simply as a consequence of the propinquity factor. In this respect, regional location is not only more densely populated Jewishly but is also the area of the country where ethnic differences are more clearly recognized. The West Coast, on the other hand, is an area where American individualism has been carried to its most extreme. Thus, communities of equal size will be more or less exposed to intermarriage depending upon their geographic location. Combining both of these factors, we can conclude that suburbs should be more prone to intermarriage than Jewish communities in central cities, while suburbs on the West Coast will be the most intermarriage prone of all. Under-

standing these factors, we can better evaluate the statistics available to us.

By the same token, the maintenance of viable Jewish institutions will also vary according to size and location, with more viable institutions maintained in communities of smaller size the farther removed those communities are from the East Coast centers of Jewish life. Necessity makes a Jewish community of 10,000 west of the Mississippi far more of a center than a Jewish community of 10,000 in New Jersey. At the same time, the

intensity of Jewish life within the institutions will suffer the farther removed they are from major Jewish centers simply because those Jews who are committed to living the fullest kind of Jewish life are less likely to seek employment or to stay in such communities; they seek, rather, the strength of numbers which is more readily available in the centers rather than on the peripheries. A full understanding of these and other factors will strongly enhance our ability to plan for American Jewish life in the next generation.

Mysticism: Lures & Dangers

Roger E. Herst

John Dewey said of the perennial problems in the history of philosophy that they are never solved. Times change and we simply lose interest in them! If true, Dewey's insight turns philosophy on its head. For if it is social conditioning which governs our approach to philosophic problems, then the normal sequence of question followed by answer and problem, by solution, must be inverted. It is not the questions we posit which define the replies we receive, but rather the answers we want that determine the questions we ask.

Working backwards *a posteriori* from effect to cause can be especially enlightening when trying to understand the current American fascination with mysticism and the occult. Jacob Needleman (*The New Religions*, Doubleday) attributes the appeal of Eastern religions in the West (the west West, i.e., California) to

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the anguish and suffering of life in America. However, it is not Vietnam, race inequities, pollution nor poverty which makes postwar Americans so attracted to Eastern religious withdrawal (Dropping Out!), but rather the affluent society with all its mechanisms for pleasure gratification. While India was the source of these religious movements because she had so little, America is the recipient because she has so much. But on both extremes the philosophy is the same.

It was experiencing "California" which drove Needleman to his exploration of Zen, Subud, Sufism, Transcendental Meditation and a host of lesser known religious sects. Obviously, the mild climate and frontier atmosphere of the Golden State makes it a haven for various cults and bizarre movements. But the esoterics thrive in California for a more significant reason. In a "quasi-paradise" human desires are constantly being frustrated because they only appear to be satisfied in