



## Who Makes Decisions for the *Edah*?

Rela Mintz Geffen

The necessary though sometimes pained essay by Israel Singer in the June 2002 issue of *Sh'ma* raises many difficult issues. Among the thorny questions posed by implication in his discussion of the future distribution of Holocaust restitution funds is: "Who shall make decisions for the Jewish people?" Singer never poses the question directly. Instead he makes categorical statements about who should and should not have a decision-making role.

For example, he writes, "Survivors should not decide all questions about funds restored to the Jewish people from the Holocaust," implying that they should decide some matters though offering no mechanism to enable such participation. Then he states, "Those decisions [presumably the ones unsuitable for survivors to vet] should be entrusted to a new body that would include. . ." Finally he writes, "The purpose of this effort would be to create a new future for the Jewish people . . . to rebuild the Jewish soul and spirit." While his delineation of mission is very noble, there are many visions for the "optimum" future for the Jewish soul. Although Singer has many credentials that give him the right to weigh in on these matters, there are other considerations. So let us step back for a moment and look at some historical and political precedents as we contemplate optimal decision-making mechanisms for the Jewish people today.

Historically, decisions for the Jewish community have not generally been made in the fashion of New England town meetings. Classical and medieval Jewish precedents for decision-making are based on unanimity, majority rule, and hierarchy. (Those interested in this subject might consult articles by Gerald Blidstein and Menahem Elon in Daniel J. Elazar's edited book *Kinship and Consent*.) Representative government, or what Elazar felicitously termed aristocratic republicanism, was the normative order of the day. It is true that at the founding of communities or organizations, assent was required

from all legally constituted members known as *yehidim* or *baalei batim* (householders), but from then on designated *ne'emanim* (literally trustees) or *tuvei ha'ir* (city notables) were empowered to make decisions for the group. There was also a system of balance of power based on a tripartite leadership model that included civil leaders, priests, and Torah scholars who were legal experts. In the parlance of *Pirkei Avot* (Sayings of the Fathers), these three leadership groups represented the *Keter Torah* (crown of the law), the *Keter Kehunah* (crown of the priesthood), and the *Keter Malchut* (crown of kingship).

Given a continuous, though evolving, Jewish political tradition of delegated decision-making, we can legitimately posit that representatives selected by qualified electors and coming out of the spiritual, civic, and legal elites of Jewish communities around the world could constitute an official decision-making group. But is this a

utopian idea — a dream never to be actualized? Raucous verbal exchanges at recent meetings of the World Zionist Congress in Jerusalem, for example, demonstrate the difficulty of getting contemporary Jewish leaders to put aside their own interests and work together for the future of the Jewish people.

Two central characteristics of Jewish peoplehood in modernity include the voluntary nature of identification with the *edah* (Jewish body politic), and the need for achieving consensus to mobilize voluntary action. Protracted searches for consensus have led to intellectual and programmatic gridlock. Even when the gridlock is cleared, action plans often represent a lowest common denominator so as not to offend any of the parties. Too often, at least in the American Jewish community, consensus is understood as an agreement not to move forward unless everyone is in the same place or of one mind.

I learned from one of my graduate students that Quakers have a different definition of consensus that, if adopted by the Jewish community, might lead to more effective action. In the Quaker worldview, con-

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sensus is defined as the agreement by all to move forward with a particular plan whether or not all concur that it is best or most desirable. All participants in the decision abide by the views of elders, experts, or leaders revered for their excellent past decisions. The consensus is not on the substance, but rather on the decision to move forward, which then allows for more rapid decision-making and experimentation with substantive solutions.

Assuming that decision-making via consensus can be reached, the original question comes back to haunt us: Who shall the representatives be and how shall they be chosen? One possibility would be similar to that of voting for president of the United States. Any individual Jew who wished to participate would receive a ballot with a list of potential representatives/delegates and vote for ten or however many were to be on a newly established high commission for the Jewish future. An alternative method would be to work from organizational membership bases. In the first round, each synagogue or chapter of a Jewish organization would be entitled to nominate a delegate to the commission. The resulting list might be circulated to individual members who would rank the nominees. This process might be facilitated through the Internet. While this may work for the United States, it might not be transportable to other Diaspora communities or Israel. It also raises the problem of how unaffiliated Diaspora Jews will be represented. A method to avoid is that presidents or other leaders of existing national organizations pick the members of such a commission. If this commission is to have the trust of Jews at the grassroots, then its composition should not be determined by a method reminiscent of the famous "round up the usual suspects."

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*Sh'ma* (ISSN 0049-0385) is published by Jewish Family & Life! monthly except July and August. Application to mail at periodical-class postage rates pending at Newton, MA 02459. **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to *Sh'ma*, P.O. Box 1019, Manchester, NH 03105-1019. Subscriptions: \$36 for two years in U.S.; \$21 for one year; \$24 for one year overseas; \$44 for two years overseas; bulk subscriptions of 10 or more to one address, \$12 per subscription; students, the retired or those of restricted means may subscribe for one year at \$9; institutional subscriptions and libraries, \$36. Please notify the subscription office in writing if you prefer that your name not be given out on rented lists.

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ISSN: 0049-0385 September 2002