

The current Jewish Renaissance reflects an efflorescence of creativity — one that is being tapped through the arts and a multiplicity of new gateways into Jewish community.

The Jewish Renaissance Agenda: Emerging Challenges

Alisa Rubin Kurshan

The Jewish Renaissance agenda in the year 2000 has evolved and matured from the early years of the continuity movement. What began as a reaction — some believed an overreaction — to the alarming intermarriage statistics of the 1990 National Jewish Population Study is now a flourishing initiative that seeks to answer the most vexing question facing Jews today: how to live meaningfully as modern Jews in the most accepting and tolerant society in which Jews have ever found themselves.

Many people questioned whether the leadership of the American Jewish community could sustain its focus on the continuity agenda. Could the community support a long-term commitment to strengthening Jewish identity when it was accustomed to responding to discrete crises and to mounting dramatic campaigns?

Early indications have been positive: Federations are increasingly committed to the long-term challenges of renewing Jewish life as a core part of their mission, strengthening their partnership with synagogues, and investing more in creative Jewish expression and quality Jewish education.

As this agenda has matured, most informed ob-

servers now recognize that there is no magic bullet, no miraculous panacea, no Jewish inoculation that will ensure that we or our children will be engaged, literate, affiliated, or in-married Jews. There is a growing understanding that we need a variety of high-quality experiences and strong institutions to guide Jews

through the stages of their lives since no Jewish experience succeeds in a vacuum. In response to this challenge, most communities today are engaged in supporting a wide range of initiatives: synagogue transformation projects, Jewish education — adult, day school, early childhood, family, and congregational — increasing the numbers who participate in Israel experiences and Jewish summer camping, Hillels, other Jewish

college student programs, and more.

The challenge facing Renaissance today is to deepen our understanding of the changing nature of Jewish identity and expression, and to widen our definition of success. We have long characterized success by rates of participation in Jewish life. It has been axiomatic that the more vibrant and magnetic our gateway institutions — such as synagogues, Hillels, Jewish community centers, and Jewish day schools — the

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more likely it will be that those who seek to be more connected Jewishly will find their way to those institutions. The image of magnets is not accidental: It has generally been assumed that there is a core to "quality Jewish life" toward which those on the periphery need to be attracted.

Yet the latest research in Jewish identity suggests that this paradigm might be insufficient for future policy and directions. For those seeking Jewish expression through organized Jewish settings we are on the right track! We need to continue to strengthen our local gateway institutional settings for Jewish living and learning. However, for those who care about being Jewish but who do not seek conventional forms of expression or are not drawn by the pull of the synagogue, Hillel, or other local Jewish institutions, our strategies to date are inadequate. Armed with a deeper appreciation for the complexity of our community, we need to reconceptualize our models. We must recognize that

there will be a galaxy of stars, some of which reside in constellations, others that might burn brightly alone. Many Jews will become part of communal institutions. Yet despite our best efforts to provide connections to the organized Jewish community, some Jews may choose to relate to Judaism more individually—perhaps through the Internet or through solitary spiritual practice. In addition to the current paradigms of Jewish identity and affiliation, new patterns will emerge in the future that we have not yet fully imagined. Sustaining current modes of affiliation while nurturing new patterns of identity will continue to remain the complex challenge of the Renaissance agenda.

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Rebuilding Jewish Communities

Arnold Eisen

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was surely correct when he complained, some forty years ago, that Jewish leaders had focused their attention on "the problem of the Jewish people, the group, the community, its institutions," at the expense of concern for the individual Jew and his or her "intimate problems... the search for meaning." Organized American Jewry has learned this lesson at long last, thank goodness. The current devotion to Renaissance should help individual Jews bring Jewish history and traditions, ethics and culture, ritual and faith, to bear on the vital personal question: "What shall I do with my mind, my money, my resources?" We now perhaps face the opposite challenge to the one Heschel posed: getting Jewish individuals reattached to their tradition and reanchored in its rituals, to defy the strongly personalist direction of American culture and society at this moment and look *outwards* as well as within. Can we motivate larger numbers of Jews to attach themselves to Jewish communities—groups of Jews bound to one another by ties of tangible obligation and engaged in serious dialogue with Jewish history and traditions?

A wealth of data about contemporary America,

gathered and analyzed brilliantly by political scientist Robert Putnam in his recent study *Bowling Alone*, gives cause for some concern. It demonstrates that Americans have substantially disengaged in recent decades from participation in a wide range of activities that bind individuals to their society and to one another. Voting and political participation have significantly decreased. Membership and attendance at churches, PTAs, and fraternal organizations are down. Socializing with friends, joining a bowling league, and giving to any charitable cause have all declined. Americans are far less civically engaged now than they were forty years ago, far more wrapped up in themselves and those closest to them at the moment. Mobility, sprawl, economic insecurity, and a host of other factors have taken their toll on "social capital." Robert Bellah's conclusion fifteen years ago in *Habits of the Heart*—that *individualism* is the language Americans spoke most often and most eloquently, *community* a distant second—is even more true today.

Recent research on American Jews tells a similar story. When Steven M. Cohen and I interviewed "moderately active Jews" around the country for our new study *The Jew Within*, most of them baby boomers, we