

A Jewish Contract With America

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NORMALLY, when the representative organizations of a small minority emphatically back public policies that are just as emphatically rejected by the majority of American voters, one might expect at least a modicum of internal soul-searching about the wisdom of the minority's positions—particularly when those positions are only tangentially related to the group's actual interests. Yet any such mood of introspection has been noticeably absent from the organized Jewish community since last November, when a new Republican majority came to power in both houses of Congress on the basis of a Contract With America.

That "contract," among other things, runs counter to the fundamental approaches of Jewish public policy, with its decades-long tradition of endorsing government spending on social problems and its unquestioning faith in the proverbial "wall of separation" between church and state. But instead of pondering the sagacity of a position so out of sync with the mood of the country, the established organizations, after recovering from their stunned disappointment at the election results, have pledged themselves to combat the Contract With America. Remarkably, there seems to have been no debate about whether such an unbending approach is really good for American Jews.

How have things come to such a pass?

TO UNDERSTAND the role played by the established organizations in the formulation of Jewish public policy today, a bit of history is in order. Most of them came into being early in this century as defense agencies, with the explicit mandate of combating anti-Semitism both at home and abroad. First among them was the American Jewish Committee, founded in 1906 by a cadre of "uptown Jews" drawn from the German-Jewish elite of New York, Philadelphia, and other East Coast communities. A few years later, in 1913, leaders of Midwestern and Southern Jewish communities, again mostly of German origin, ex-

pressed their independence from New York by founding an Anti-Defamation League (ADL) under the auspices of the Chicago-based B'nai B'rith. Then, during World War I, still a third organization, the American Jewish Congress, was established—this time by the children of East European immigrants who wished to democratize Jewish life.

In time, these organizations broadened their constituencies, and the uptown/downtown rivalries faded. Each carved out a separate niche and developed a different strategy in the battle against anti-Semitism. But that battle, narrowly and exactly conceived, remained their first priority.

In the middle decades of the century, however, and with growing intensity after World War II, each of these groups began to recast its agenda in much broader and more expansive terms. The rise of Nazism abroad, and recrudescence of anti-Semitism at home, seemed to convey a clear lesson: anti-Semitism posed a threat not only to Jews but to the proper functioning of society at large, indeed to democracy itself. Hence, the best strategy for countering anti-Semitism was to cast it in terms of that larger threat. Moreover, since anti-Semitism was intertwined with all prejudice, it became imperative to deal with the social ills which fostered such prejudice.

And so the organizations reconceived their mission. They initiated programs to fight prejudice and discrimination against all groups, especially black Americans; developed legal departments to file briefs articulating their positions on pending court cases; and worked to educate American society about group differences.

A change of name symbolized this turn to a greater universalism: Jewish defense organizations now became known as "human-relations" agencies, and their scope of operation came to be defined as "community relations." Under that rubric, the organizations worked in the immediate postwar years for the passage of civil-rights legislation and for the revision of American immigration laws which set quotas based on national origins. Significantly, both these campaigns were undertaken in alliance with non-Jewish interest groups, respectively the NAACP and the American Immigration and Citizenship Conference.

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And the success of the two campaigns encouraged the agencies to expand their network of coalition partners still further.

Already by 1944 the field had grown sufficiently to warrant the creation of a coordinating body, the National Community Relations Advisory Council, which later added the word "Jewish" to its name and became known by its acronym, NJCRAC. This umbrella council was initially designed to coordinate the efforts of fourteen local and a half-dozen national agencies. Today, 50 years after its founding, NJCRAC has grown to encompass 117 local community councils and 13 national agencies, representing not only the old defense organizations but also representative bodies from the three major religious streams of Judaism, the largest women's organizations—Hadassah, the National Council of Jewish Women, and Women's American ORT—as well as Jewish War Veterans and the Jewish Labor Committee.

Each of these organizations devotes some of its energies and funds to aspects of "community relations," leading to what can easily seem to be a fair amount of duplication and overlap. Indeed, over the years there have been repeated calls for the merger of specific individual agencies. Most recently, at a general assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations, Edgar Bronfman, the president of the World Jewish Congress, proposed the merger or elimination of the three national defense agencies that monitor and fight anti-Semitism.

But the fact is that despite areas of overlap, the national agencies *have* developed a division of labor among them; and each specializes in building coalitions with different partners. The American Jewish Congress, for instance, is mainly engaged in legal work, and has earned its reputation as the "Jewish ACLU" by linking the Jewish community with the civil-liberties sector of American society. Both the American Jewish Committee and the ADL are active in interfaith work, but each targets different ethnic populations for cooperative ventures. Thus, the Committee has opened channels of communication in recent years with Asian Americans and Pacific-rim nations. In the struggle against domestic anti-Semitism, the ADL for its part continues to play an important role as a monitor of hate groups that endanger other minorities. Duplicative programs would seem a small price to pay for the links forged by these organizations with non-Jewish groups in the United States and abroad.

Nevertheless, Bronfman was right to focus a spotlight on Jewish organizational life. The community-relations field does warrant close scrutiny—not, however, because of wasteful overlap, but because it is driven by lay and professional leaders whose underlying assumption is that the Jewish community should speak with a single voice on matters of public policy that have little

direct bearing on Jewish interests. The effect of this leveling perspective is to convey the impression, wrong but understandable, that what the community-relations field has to say on matters of public policy represents the views of American Jewry as a whole.

AND what does it have to say? Every year since 1953, NJCRAC has issued a Joint Program Plan to codify the consensus positions of its constituent groups. It is instructive to compare the plan of 1954 with that for 1994-95. Whereas the former stresses basic objectives "that do not change with changing times"—namely, "the protection and enhancement of equal rights and opportunities and the creation of conditions that contribute toward vital Jewish living"—the latter construes its mandate much more broadly. Conditions "conducive to the creative continuity and well-being of the Jewish community," NJCRAC now avers,

can be achieved only within a social framework committed to democratic pluralism; freedom of religion, thought, expression, and association; the wall of separation between church and state; equal rights; justice and opportunity; and a climate in which differences among groups are accepted and respected, and in which each is free to cultivate its own distinctive values while participating fully in the general life of the society.

What follows from this all-embracing vision is a laundry list of positions espoused by the official Jewish community on a whole slew of American social issues, all ranged on the Left-liberal side of the political spectrum. Here, for example, is a brief sampler of what NJCRAC includes in its 1994-95 "Domestic Agenda": a plan for *national health-care coverage*, more comprehensive than the ill-fated Clinton proposal and including universal access, comprehensive preventive care, choice of services, affordable costs, funds for research, continuing education for providers, and "just compensation for all workers"; a ringing endorsement of *public-school education*, coupled with unwavering opposition to any aid to parochial schools; complete opposition to *capital punishment*; a statement on *AIDS* which instructs the Department of Health and Human Services to remove "the HIV virus from the list of 'dangerous and contagious diseases' for which aliens are excludable from this country"; a strong endorsement of *environmental programs*, including a call for "the elevation of the Environmental Protection Agency to Cabinet status."

Now, whether these policy positions offer the best solutions to contemporary social problems in the United States is itself a debatable proposition. But why, one asks oneself, have they been enunciated *in the name* of the American Jewish community? And why should that community be investing its moral and political capital in sup-

port of policies that do not affect Jews as a group—and about which American Jews as individual citizens undoubtedly hold a variety of opinions?

AS IT happens, a number of justifications have been offered over the years for NJCRAC's forays into public policy, and some of them appear in the 1994-95 Joint Program Plan. Perhaps the major one is that the Jewish tradition itself *commands* political activism, and even endorses particular (liberal) policies. In the words of the Joint Program Plan: "American Jewish activism reflects the essence of the Judaic concept of '*mitzvot*,' to act upon commandments."

This, however, only begs the question of which particular commandments of the tradition are to be heeded, and how they are to be translated into a political program—a question brought vividly to the fore last December in, of all places, the *New York Times*. The opening salvo was fired by a new conservative group called "Toward Tradition" which, in a paid advertisement on the *Times* op-ed page, emphatically stated that "Judaism and its eternal values have little in common with modern American liberalism" and called upon American Jews instead to rally to the banner of "freedom, decency, individual responsibility, and *true* compassion." A rejoinder ad was quickly placed by a liberal group, the Ad Hoc Jewish Committee for Social Justice, which reminded readers of Judaism's "core commitment . . . to the pursuit of justice."

Yet even this second ad went on to note, candidly enough, that Jews "don't always agree with each other on how the hungry may best be fed, the naked clothed, social justice achieved." Indeed, it is precisely over the application of general principles of justice and compassion that decent people disagree. Is, for instance, capital punishment (which happens to be *commanded* by the Torah) an act of social justice or of social evil? If we call for strict gun control, are we protecting the innocent or depriving them of the means of defending themselves against criminals (such self-defense being, again, commanded by the Torah)? Liberal activists claim that the American welfare system as presently constituted is perfectly congruent with Jewish teachings of *tzedakah* (justice, charity); but is that so, when the traditionally preferred form of Jewish giving is one that safeguards the dignity of the recipient?

Aware, perhaps, of the dangers of simplification, the NJCRAC Joint Program Plan sidesteps Jewish religious teachings by taking them for granted: "It is *assumed* [emphasis added] that those [to] whom the Plan is principally addressed are fully cognizant of [the] matrices of Jewish thought and actions and are moved by them." But the absence of explicit references to religious traditions undermines the claim that the Plan is in fact grounded in Jewish teachings.

Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in

the unqualified endorsement the Plan gives to what it euphemistically refers to as "women's rights . . . to reproductive choice services"—that is, abortion. At a time of raging debate in American society, it is simply staggering that in a major annual statement, the established organizations of the Jewish community should confidently pronounce on court cases, assess legislation, evaluate individual programs, and discuss the pros and cons of health benefits while offering only a glancing reference to abortion as a moral problem. It is all the more staggering in light of the fact that several of NJCRAC's own constituents, including the Women's League for Conservative Judaism as well as Orthodox groups, have forthrightly addressed these agonizing moral issues in their own literature. The evident indifference of the Joint Program Plan to Jewish ethics and Jewish religion alike cannot but lend credence to those who view NJCRAC's positions as a product of no other religion than liberalism.

Another justification for NJCRAC's brand of activism is that it serves the group interests of Jews to encourage those forces in society that are tolerant and socially "conscious." As we have seen, this view is grounded in historical experience: the destruction of European Jewry convinced many that the fate of Jews was directly linked to the welfare of society at large, and necessitated a more cosmopolitan concern for the weak and needy. In recent decades, however, this concern has progressively extended its reach to absurd lengths. By what definition of the Jewish group interest is it desirable for the organized Jewish community to take a stand on specific items of legislation concerning the environment, or to issue a solemn proclamation in favor of elevating an environmental watchdog agency to Cabinet status?

Then there is a third rationale—namely, that most American Jews do, in fact, concur with the public-policy positions taken by NJCRAC. There is some merit to this argument. Surveys consistently find that Jews tend to favor an activist government and liberal positions. Moreover, NJCRAC can accurately claim that its deliberative processes are among the most democratic in Jewish organizational life, with much internal consultation of constituent groups. The Joint Program Plan, according to this argument, reflects the will of American Jews.

In truth, however, matters are more complex. Lay and professional leaders of community-relations agencies are not randomly selected but gravitate to the field because they are social activists; it is difficult to imagine a political conservative, or someone eager to slash spending programs, rising far in a local, let alone a national, community-relations organization. Moreover, consultations within NJCRAC are one-sided: most of its constituent members take no posi-

tion on a whole range of issues of interest to the leadership, and have neither the personnel nor the engaged interest to judge most items on the Domestic Agenda. Members pick their fights carefully; on matters that do not concern them directly, they tend to defer to the coordinating body.

In recent years, still a fourth rationale has been advanced for NJCRAC's wide-ranging social agenda—namely, that it can provide an avenue for that most highly-prized desideratum, Jewish continuity. According to the Joint Program Plan:

Special emphasis should be placed on reaching out to the many Jews who are responsive to the social-justice agenda set forth in the . . . Plan but are currently marginal in their involvement in Jewish life. . . . The critical element is to provide the Jewish vehicles through which they can act as Jews.

The Jewish community, it is here being suggested, can help solve its deep problem of internal disaffiliation by recruiting new leaders not from the ranks of the already committed and knowledgeable but from those on the periphery who happen to have the "correct" politics—which is also, by definition, a "Jewish" politics. One hardly knows how to respond to the breathtaking circularity, and the presumptuousness, of this logic.

WHEN all is said and done, though, the most plausible justification for NJCRAC's domestic agenda is none of the above, but rather a frankly political one. This justification, too, makes its appearance in the Joint Program Plan. As a small minority, it is said, the Jewish community must forge links with coalition partners in the hope that these partners will speak out for Jewish interests:

The multi-issue public-policy agenda of the Jewish community-relations field . . . will lead the community to deepen its involvement in the various coalitions that, like us, address issues of poverty, the urban agenda, and social justice. . . . It will [also] enable us to build networks and allies to advance other aspects of the Jewish public-affairs agenda.

Here, at last, is an honest statement of Jewish political interests. But it is also one which, unlike the others, lends itself to a hard-nosed evaluation. Specifically, we can ask which, if any, of the community's coalition partners have "delivered" in return for Jewish support of *their* agendas. For example, has Jewish cooperation with other minority groups on racial and urban matters been rewarded with a strong effort by these groups to root out anti-Semitism in their own ranks? Have African-American allies of the Jewish community acted to temper the eagerness of campus minority organizations to host African-American hate-mongers? Similar questions could be raised re-

garding the behavior of other coalition partners, such as left-wing groups and liberal Protestant denominations that have little patience with Israel.

There is also a larger question to be asked about the coalition partners chosen by the community-relations field. By tilting so heavily toward liberals, has the community missed an opportunity to forge relationships with conservatives? Take the opening section of an earlier Joint Program Plan (1993-94), which announced with pride:

Reliable figures show that nearly 85 percent of all Jews who voted in 1992 cast their ballot for the Democratic candidate. Many of the issues on the Clinton administration's agenda have long been advocated by the organized Jewish community. Therefore the organized Jewish community has the responsibility to participate in the effort to enact those parts of the Clinton program that are consistent with its existing policies.

One cannot help wondering: *as a community*, would it not be wise to maintain neutrality as between the two major political parties, except where the immediate interests of Jews are at stake? Is not doing otherwise the height of political folly, tantamount to inviting one of the parties to write off the Jews altogether?

One consequence of being identified so directly with the Democrats is that the organized Jewish community has effectively removed itself from any role in the critical battles now shaping up among Republicans. The GOP contains a right-wing extreme that is isolationist and not afraid to invoke populist bigotry, including anti-Semitism. It also contains internationalists and politicians who seek to rebuild American society through constructive and responsible programs. As the internal factional battle unfolds, the organized Jewish community finds itself on the sidelines, asking its Democratic friends to intervene in the struggle for control of the Republican party.

SO FAR, the community seems oblivious of the price it is paying for its politics. An example is the obsessive campaign to erect an impermeable wall of separation between church and state. For decades, this "separationist faith," as it has been aptly dubbed, has been a cardinal principle of the community-relations field, and it is affirmed once again in the Joint Program Plan:

The Jewish community always has been profoundly aware that maintaining a firm line of separation between church and state is essential to religious freedom and the religious voluntarism which fosters the creative and distinctive survival of diverse religious groups, such as our own. There always has been an ebb and flow of attempts to breach the wall of separation between church and state in America.

Vigorous efforts to protect the principle of church-state separation continue to be vital.

Left unstated in this broad historical generalization are two critically important qualifications. First, once upon a time, and until the postwar era, the Jewish community responded with much greater flexibility to the “ebb and flow” of opinion concerning the proper relation between church and state. As the historian Naomi W. Cohen concludes in her *Jews in Christian America* (1992):

After the turn of the [20th] century, the customary zeal of the strict separationists was slowly tempered. Graver challenges faced by the rapidly expanding and maturing Jewish community . . . reordered priorities, consumed resources, and generated fear. . . . At the same time Jewish spokesmen were forced to concede that church-state separation was no longer an adequate guarantee of Jewish security. . . .

And yet today, 100 years later, the community-relations field will not relent in its inflexible defense of strict separationism, even though graver challenges face the American Jewish community.

The justification most frequently voiced for this inflexibility is that all the historic achievements of American Jews—economic, social, cultural, and religious—are predicated on strict separationism. As a former president of the American Jewish Congress once put it, the security, confidence, and “at-homeness” of American Jews are all due to the unrelenting fight against government identification with religion. Yet it does not take the eye of a trained historian to notice that across the border in Canada, or across the ocean in Western Europe, Jewish communities have thrived culturally and achieved high levels of social and economic success in environments where church and state are not separated by an unbreachable wall.

THE misreading of history and of present-day reality to justify strict separationism is not merely an academic sin; it informs the response of the organized community to church-state issues of our own time. Thus, immediately after last November’s elections, when talk began to be heard of a constitutional amendment to permit some form of voluntary

school prayer, NJCRAC swiftly issued an “action alert” to rally its constituents. “The organized Jewish community,” it warned, “must take the lead in opposing any proposed school-prayer amendment or other legislation mandating organized prayer in school.” Around the same time, the Council of Jewish Federations issued its own resolution opposing school prayer.

Only a few lone voices even called for a reconsideration of this matter. One of them belonged to Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League, who declared, “We owe it to ourselves to reevaluate the issue.” Foxman then promptly fired off a letter to President Clinton opposing a constitutional amendment on school prayer. So much for reevaluation—and so much for the flexibility displayed by earlier leaders of American Jewry.

Blind opposition is one thing, and bad enough; even more worrisome is NJCRAC’s call for the organized Jewish community to *lead* the campaign against a constitutional amendment permitting school prayer. Where are the vaunted “coalition partners” of the Jewish community on this issue? Why are *they* not leading the charge? And what price—in, precisely, community relations with other Americans—will American Jews pay for assuming the lead?

To ask such questions today is to invite ridicule. After all, we are told, the great lesson of the Holocaust was that Jews should never ask, as did earlier generations, “*mah yomru ha-goyim*,” what will the Gentiles think? Once again, however, Naomi Cohen hints that matters are more complicated. In the recent past, she writes, Jewish exponents of strict separationism failed to

consider whether their stand reinforced the pervasive secularism within the Jewish community. Nor did they admit that on [this] issue of secularism, the community stood apart from most Americans, who have continued to identify as believers and churchgoers.

How ironic it is that organizations which began their careers as defense agencies, and then became agencies dedicated to enhancing community relations, should now be committing themselves to policies that seem tailor-made not to decrease but rather to increase the level of tension between Jews and other Americans.