

THE MEANING OF JEWISH CONTINUITY IN THE NORTH AMERICAN COMMUNITY: A PRELIMINARY EMPIRICAL ASSESSMENT*

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From the East Bay in California to New York and from Coastal Florida to the Great Lakes waters, the organized Jewish community, led by the local federation, is coming to grips with the implications of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (Kosmin, et al., 1991) for Jewish continuity or discontinuity.

To paraphrase the authors of the most famous manifesto of the nineteenth century, "A specter is haunting..." the North American Jewish Community—"the specter of..." discontinuity.¹

A PILOT RESEARCH PROJECT

What does the organized Jewish community mean by the ubiquitous and amorphous slogan of "Jewish continuity?" In order to assess the nature and meaning of Jewish continuity, JESNA undertook to solicit continuity statements from all 187 member federations of the Council of Jewish Federations. In total, 23 statements were submitted, but 7

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Forum:

were excluded because they did not deal directly with continuity.² The 16 remaining usable statements formed the basis of this analysis, which could be viewed as a "pilot project" for a potentially larger more systematic study. The reader is therefore cautioned that the small number of cases collected by JESNA suggests that the findings and implications must be judged as tentative and subject to further investigation.

Before we report on what these 16 statements reveal about Jewish continuity, we wanted to know whether there was any pattern in the types of communities who replied to JESNA's request for a copy of the local Jewish community continuity statement. The Council of Jewish Federations divides its 187 member agencies located in the United States and Canada into one of five different categories based on city size. The following listing first shows the *agency city size*, followed by the *number of communities* in that category, followed by the *percent who replied* to JESNA's request for a continuity statement:

- a) Large, (18): 33%;
- b) Large Intermediate, (22): 18%;
- c) Intermediate, 53: 11%;
- d) Small, (64): 0%;
- e) Volunteer-led, (30): 0%.

The above listing clearly reveals that the larger the community, the more likely the community possesses a Jewish continuity statement as well as the willingness to share it. Certainly the size of the community and the campaign permits a greater allocation of staff resources to develop such a statement.³

The rest of this report will focus on the following issues concerning the submitted continuity statements:

1. the definition of continuity,
2. the mission statement or vision,
3. the general goals, specific objectives and the proposed target groups.

Concluding sections on policy implications and recommendations based on this analysis will be offered.

DEFINITIONS OF CONTINUITY

What does an examination of the 16 usable continuity statements reveal? Simply stated, there is no clear cut consensus as to how to define Jewish continuity. While three communities did not offer a specific definition of Jewish continuity, the remaining ones had at the very least an implied definition and, in most cases, a clear definition of continuity. For these remaining 13 communities, a picture of continuity in "triple vision" emerged; that is, they saw Jewish continuity as emphasizing *Jewish education, values, and culture* (6), ensuring the vitality of the *Jewish community* (4) or promoting the *Jewish identity of individuals* (3). Thus at the local community level, Jewish continuity has a "tri-focal" approach.

Is there a way to clarify the picture in order to bring it into unitary focus? Actually, all three elements, *community, identity and education*, have a role to play in the conceptualization of Jewish continuity. If one applies the perspective of social psychology to the issue at hand, then it

Jewish Continuity
1407 ✓

Jewish Identity and Continuity

becomes apparent how to develop a linkage among these three dimensions that shape Jewish continuity.

Every community and society is faced with the necessity of dealing with its continuity. The established social-psychological answer to the problem of continuity is contained in the process of socialization, which represents the attempt by society to instill its beliefs, values and norms within individual members. In other words, socialization refers to the internalization of the culture of a society within its individual members. In the case of Jewish continuity, therefore, the Jewish community seeks to cultivate a Jewish identity in its members through a process of socialization relying on such agents as the family, peer group activities as well as formal and informal education. ' The problem facing the Jewish community, however, is that the family is not well equipped to fulfill its function of socialization. Moreover, peer group influences may be much more secularized and oriented toward the larger culture rather than toward Jewish values. Thus, many communities have concluded that the primary focus has to be on the broad range of Jewish educational options including both formal and informal programs.

In sum, the meaning, and consequential thrust of Jewish continuity, therefore, can be seen as the effort of the Jewish community to influence the individual's Jewish identity by promoting a comprehensive socialization process rooted in a variety of Jewish educational activities both formal and informal, oriented to the classroom as well as the family and

peer group. This process of socialization through education, to be effective, must include exposure to the totality of the culture and civilization of the Jews, e.g., beliefs and values as well as norms and practices.⁵

Practically speaking, to provide Jewish continuity through building the Jewish identity of youth requires that formal education in the classroom be complemented by educational summer camps and Israel trips. They are especially useful because they provide the unique opportunity to experience the totality of Jewish existence twenty-four hours a day and to discover that Judaism is not a religious alternative to Christianity but the civilization of a people that has been evolving for nearly four millennia.

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MISSION STATEMENT OR VISION

All of the usable continuity documents contain some mission statement or vision. Half focused on the development of a community plan (8). Others spoke of a collective Jewish communal future (4) or more specifically about improvements necessary in Jewish education (4). Finally, one statement also spoke of the primary need to gather more data. (Perhaps a sociologist made that statement!)

Typical of the modal response was one statement (1) from an intermediate community, which suggested the following:

One, to educate the community about the need to focus attention on programs and services in the areas of informal Jewish education that can strengthen Jewish identity, continuity, and affiliation. Two, to advocate that the Federation assume the responsibility for convening community leaders to plan, implement, and coordinate effective and cost efficient programs and services furthering Jewish continuity, and that the

Federation establish the community-wide structure and process to accomplish these tasks.

This is an example of a statement that focused on the development of a community plan and proposed that Jewish education be the particular mechanism for ensuring Jewish continuity.

Another statement (II) from a large intermediate city succinctly summarized its mission as follows:

The Commission on Jewish Continuity should therefore see as its mission taking preventative and pro-active measures to help ensure our collective Jewish future.

Taking these statements together, we might suggest the following prototypical example of a mission statement (original words from statements I and II in italics):

“to help ensure our collective Jewish future by transmitting Jewish identity (II) from one generation to another, thus furthering Jewish continuity (I).

This mission statement could then be followed by a planning statement:

- a) take preventative and pro-active measures (II), to
- b) educate the community about the need to focus attention on programs and services in the areas of informal Jewish education (I); and to
- c) establish a community-wide structure and process (I); to
- d) convene community leaders to plan, implement and coordinate effective and cost efficient programs and services (I).

The elaboration of such statements undoubtedly could be aided by professional guidance through meetings and publications by appropriate national organizations.

To summarize, most statements enunciated lofty ideals about the need to develop a collective vision

Forum:

through a community process and to try to empower as many players in the community as possible. This would be consistent with Heilbrun's assessment: "Power is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter" (1988, p.18)

Indeed, it seemed easier for the various communities to develop a mission statement or vision than to come to terms with a definition of continuity. Ultimately, however, the lack of a clear cut, agreed upon definition of continuity might hinder the attainment of general goals and specific objectives usually enunciated in each of the statements.

GENERAL GOALS, SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES, AND TARGET GROUPS

Once a mission has been articulated and a plan formulated, a set of general goals, specific objectives, and designated target groups may be formulated. With respect to *general goals*, the great majority of communities (12) called for the particular group dealing with continuity to set the direction for the community or to establish a commission to focus on the needs of continuity. At the next level of concern were statements that called for the strengthening of Jewish identity (4) or strengthening Jewish education (4). Some communities sought to build continuity by strengthening ties to Israel (3) or to the synagogue (2).⁶ Finally, one community saw the need to conduct a membership drive as an important goal, and another to

raise community awareness about the need for Jewish continuity.

All of the communities had *specific objectives* in mind in the development of their continuity statements. They varied from the importance of making a continuity commission into an important player in the community to obtaining professional staff, creating a fund for Jewish continuity, sponsoring programs, elevating the profession of Jewish education, identifying local resources, providing evaluation procedures, gaining family involvement, and integrating community resources. One large intermediate community wisely noted that there was not one specific way by which to promote Jewish continuity. They argued:

There is not a singular path to the enhancement of Jewish continuity: rather, continuity experiences must be marked by intensity, duration and quality....no experience alone is a sufficient basis for Jewish continuity.

Another community, of intermediate size, focused its efforts entirely on Jewish education and suggested:

The goal of Jewish education is to enhance and strengthen Jewish life and the Jewish people, by fostering Jewish identity, values, affiliation, ritual observance, and knowledge of Torah.

These general goals and specific objectives need to be defined in such a way that they can be measured empirically and not just stated rhetorically.

Many communities identified *specific target groups* toward which their efforts ought to be directed. The

Jewish Identity and Continuity

numbers in parentheses indicate the number of communities identifying each of the following target groups: preschoolers (1), children in general (4), teens (5), college age (6), singles (3), young couples (1), families with children (2), interfaith families (3), the unaffiliated (1), the aged (1), and those families with limited means (1). There was a clear preference oriented toward children and young people with more than three-quarters of identified target groups falling into these categories.

POLICY IMPLICATION: ASSUME A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH

In an article entitled "Why 'Continuity' is a Campaign Doomed to Failure," Lawrence H. Schiffman (1993) suggests that Jewish continuity may just be another buzz word used to motivate philanthropy or the defense of the Jewish community against attacks by others in the way the post WWII generation spoke of "Jewish survival." Schiffman concludes his article by suggesting that, "Only through a return to the beliefs and practices of our people will we be able to stem the trends we now face. It's time to understand that only Judaism -the real thing- will maintain the Jewish community. Nothing short of this will work!" Is this simply reasoning based on rhetorical flourish or an argument rooted in empirical fact?

If we assume, based on the analysis of the continuity statements cited earlier, that Jewish continuity involves a process of creating a link-

age between the organized Jewish community and the identity of individual members through a process of socialization linking one generation to another, then we are able to consult social science evidence to assess this question. In the past generation, several empirical social-scientific studies have emerged that focus on the question of Jewish identity⁷

To take a specific example,⁸ one study focused on an examination of the determinants of Jewish identification in comparing two generations of Jews, one older and one younger. In the younger generation, the religiosity of the family, the expectations for participation in Jewish activities by friends, and exposure to Jewish education were the most important elements in the shaping of Jewish identification. Thus, religious behavior of the family was most powerful, followed by peers and Jewish education.

Each one of these influences was important *independent* of what occurred in the other spheres of Jewish life. In the older generation, family activities and behavior followed by peer activities were the key factors. When more current aspects of social life were introduced, synagogue attendance became the most powerful predictor of the subsequent Jewish identification for both the younger and older generations. This finding is indicative of the fact that generally those individuals who have the strongest *attachment to the Jewish people* are those with high levels of *religiosity*. It takes a lot of Israeli dancing or Jewish philanthropy to make up for not attending synagogue or following ritual practices!

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This pilot research project sought to uncover what is meant by "Jewish continuity" at the local federation level. On the basis of an examination of 16 continuity statements, a preliminary assessment suggests that there is no agreed upon definition of continuity. Rather it assumes a trifocal approach of 1) ensuring Jewish community, 2) promoting Jewish identity, and 3) encouraging Jewish education, values and culture. Furthermore, there is no consensus as to what a mission statement should say and that may be because of the lack of agreement as to what continuity means. When it comes to general goals, however, the great majority of statements called for a special committee or commission to direct the community's attention to continuity. With respect to specific objectives, it was clear that there was no "singular path," as one statement put it, to achieve continuity. In reference to specifically identified target groups for community activity, there was substantial agreement, with over three quarters of responses focused on children and young people.

Based on these findings, in what direction can the organized Jewish community go?

- 1) *Since there is much ambiguity as to what continuity means,⁹ and how to proceed, there is need for a national consensus. Therefore, JESNA, together with the Council of Jewish Federations (CJF), through the Continental Commission on Jewish Identity and Continuity, ought to convene a conference (co-sponsored by the major synagogue denominational groupings) with the purpose of developing a consensus document on Jewish continuity.*
- 2) *Through its General Assembly, CJF, together with JESNA, should develop workshops and program guides so that every community*

learns how to identify its own target groups, and particular local goals and objectives.

To return to the metaphor at the beginning of this article, we need a twenty-first century manifesto for Jewish continuity. Skeptics might suggest that there is no basis for consensus in denominational Jewish life. Nevertheless, we would suggest that the rabbis of the Mishnah, without the benefit of modern methods of social scientific research, arrived at a conclusion not too different from the contemporary wisdom. As Simon the Just wrote in the second verse of Pirke Avot, "The world rests on three pillars: upon Torah, upon worship, and upon carrying out acts of loving kindness." While the traditional commentary is provided by Herford (1962/1945), a contemporary interpretation relevant to the world of Jewish continuity would suggest that these three elements might signify Jewish study, ritual observance and ethical behavior. All of the denominations surely would agree to the importance of maximal Jewish education, synagogue attendance and ritual observance as well as performance of ethical acts within the framework of *each of their denominations*. The particular role of non-denominational organizations within the community, such as the Jewish Federation, would be to provide the resources to assure that these kinds of activities can exist within the respective denominations. Communities which, before the continuity campaign became so important, had not offered any funds to specific congregational schools or programs are now providing such funds. In sum, what is needed is a continental commitment by the federated and denominational worlds to a "Continuity Manifesto," much as the Jerusalem Program serves for the Zionist world. Within this framework, the Jewish Community Center Movement can contribute a non-denominational reinforcement through informal Jewish education

Forum:

and cultural experiences from preschool to high school.

3) JESNA, together with CJF, needs to issue a clarion call for a major reinvestment in quality Jewish education, even perhaps by selling bonds, like the State of Israel, to finance the project as suggested by Himmelfarb (1975). As British Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (1994) writes elsewhere in this issue, "the survival of a minority is a matter of nurture, not nature. It is sustained through education, nothing else. So long as Jews learned, they lived. Once they stopped learning, Jewish identity started dying." He argues that while being Jewish may survive for three generations on the retention of memories, such memories are not sufficient for the fourth generation. Therefore, he calls for a "global reinvestment in Jewish education." He further suggests the specific objectives in which the Jewish community ought to be investing and they include, "Jewish day schools, Israel experiences, outreach programs, family education, Jewish summer camps and residential retreats." He concludes that the survivalist mentality, by which Schiffman characterized the immediate post WWII generation, of "building Holocaust memorials and sending checks to Israel," will not work in the contemporary generation. Thus, "Jewish continuity will be achieved once education and outreach become our top Diaspora priorities, receiving the best of our leadership and fund-

ing." We should add that when rabbis, scholars of antiquity, and social scientists of different denominational backgrounds are in agreement, the organized leadership of the Jewish community should take note!

4) In the final analysis we believe that *Jewish continuity will depend on the success of the Jewish community in America in redefining what have hitherto been considered milestones in Jewish life*. Currently, one of the most significant milestones in American Jewish life is the Bar/Bat mitzvah. However, it is widely known that at this crucial milestone, the majority of Jewish children choose to drop out of Jewish education with their parents' agreement.

Jewish educators need to help Jewish parents and children redefine this *milestone* which has become a *tombstone* in respect to continuity. A milestone after all is not only a marker at the end of a period but also a *stepping stone* to a new period in life. Children do not drop out of general education classes at age 12 or 13 but when they leave Hebrew school, they quit with the equivalent of a second grade education or about 1000 hours of study (see Himmelfarb, 1975). From a psychological standpoint, children's cognitive processes are still maturing and therefore the community needs to encourage continuous Jewish education, so that children's Jewishness develops with other parts of their evolving identity.

Therefore, we need to develop a *voucher system* that would give stu-

Jewish Identity

dents cash vouchers to progress through each stage of Jewish education, e.g., a cash voucher for camp on entry to school and one for an educational trip to Israel or one year's Jewish high school tuition at Bar/Bat mitzvah.

American Jewry is at the brink of a new era in its history. Jews in America today have the freedom to accept or reject Judaism and the freedom to choose any one of a multitude of values and lifestyles. Continuity projects must work toward helping Jews, who might otherwise be lost to Judaism, to choose Judaism as well as helping to support and encourage those who have already cast their lot with the Jewish people. While different communities will choose different paths to follow to achieve this end, it is imperative that the communities start to act and act soon before this new era becomes what many have predicted as being the beginning of the end of diaspora Judaism. The essential point is that declarations must lead to actions, actions backed by allocations. It is imperative that the sense of crisis created by the movement for Jewish continuity-posed by the threat of discontinuity- brings together the broadest based consensus, as outlined above, in the organized American Jewish community. As the rabbis wrote, "Ein yisrael nigalin, ad she'yihyu kulan ka'aguda ahat" (Tanhuma, Nitzavim), which translates as follows: "Israel (the Jewish people) will not be redeemed until they are united all into a single grouping."

We see this statement as a rallying cry for communal action, not neces-

sarily implying common beliefs. Unity of purpose, whether it be on the intergroup agenda of defense of Israel and resistance to anti-Semitism or the intragroup priorities of education, ritual and synagogue involvement, and ethical behavior, need not require a common ideology or theology. If the continuity movement can achieve anything, it is to use its momentum to bring together all of the major players in the organized Jewish community for the purpose of promoting Jewish education in its broadest form and encouraging the practice of normative Jewish religious and cultural life.

Notes

1. See Marx and Engels (1959/1848).
2. Some dealt specifically with local assessments of Jewish education in the community or with various other topics. Others did not submit enough documentation.
3. Of course, there are undoubtedly communities who have developed continuity statements but were not able to submit them in time to be included in this analysis. We are familiar with at least one such community which has an active Jewish continuity council and a well developed statement, but its contribution was not received in time for inclusion in this analysis.
4. These topics have been studied for several decades by social scientists including the works of Sklare and Greenblum (1967), Lazerwitz (1973), Cohen (1988)

and Dashefsky and Shapiro (1993/1974), among many others.

5. For the effects of Jewish education on Jewish identity, see Dashefsky (1992).
6. These reported goals add up to more than 16 because many communities had multiple goals.
7. See Phillips (1991) for a review of the literature.
8. See Dashefsky and Shapiro (1993/1974).
9. See the dialogue between Jeffrey Lasday, a Jewish educator, and Miriam Yenkin, CJF vice-president, in *Jewish Education News* (1994), as part of that issue's special focus on Jewish continuity.

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Forum:

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ALLIANCE OR PARTNERSHIP: SYNAGOGUE AND COMMUNITY CONFRONT JEWISH CONTINUITY

Jewish Continuity
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wherever one turns today in the Jewish community, the

theme of meetings, commissions, task forces and newspaper articles

appears to be the same—Jewish continuity and Jewish identity. Fueled by grim statistics from the National Population Study and a growing awareness of the fragility of Jewish identity, the leaders of the North American Jewish community are seeking strategies for what may be the most difficult and complex challenge they have faced in recent times—the rejuvenation of meaningful Jewish identity for a Jewish community which is fourth and fifth generation American and completely integrated into the mainstream of American society. Convening of