

Reflections on the Ten-Year Post-Yom Kippur War Period in the American Jewish Community

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Forces in the general community appear to be changing rapidly the status and place of the Jewish community in its associations with governments and other ethnic/religious bodies.

REFLECTIONS are only useful dimensions to our lives, and with regard to our careers, if the gleanings drawn from past experiences are understood in the context of time and place from which they are taken. Serving a small intermediate federation for a decade offers the student of Jewish communal affairs a unique composite view of North American Jewish life, a capsule perspective of both the primary events and prominent personalities significant to the ten-year period that followed the 1973 Yom Kippur War. What, at the outset, appeared to represent "a war to end all wars" between Israel and its Arab neighbors, came to represent the nightmare of renewed violence through the escalation of terrorism and the regionalization of this conflict beyond Israel's own borders. The vision and promise of Camp David were never fully comprehended. Similarly, neither did we address the meaning of Entebbe, the purposes behind the Lebanon invasion, the significant meaning of Operation Moses, or the U.N. decree that Zionism was a form of racism. These historic moments have yet to be fully interpreted by us or by the outside world, in the broader context of Jewish and world affairs.

As Jewish communal professionals, we have a tendency to truncate the flow of the Jewish drama into isolated spheres of experience and "crisis." The July 4, 1976, Entebbe raid; the June

1982 Peace for Galilee Campaign, among other events, placed us in isolation from the totality of activities around us. Possibly, it is the only way by which we can deal with the pressures and emotions associated with such traumas. Yet, while we may be actors engaged indirectly in each of these specific happenings, in many ways Jewish professionals may be the least equipped to measure the impact of these incidents.

What other culture or people must address so many challenges to its very existence in such a short framework of time? The Jewish community is more than a microcosm of the world scene. We appear to be tested daily, whether from pressures external to the Jewish community or from the series of issues that touch the Jewish sphere. The elements of anti-Semitism, the security issues facing Israel, the pressures endured by Jews in isolated and endangered countries, the current assault on social welfare policies and the attack on the principles of separation of church from state have involved us in broad relationships with the general society. Similarly, the new and constant challenges to Jewish identity, i.e., who is a Jew; the tensions surrounding institutional relationships, and the increasing awareness regarding disaffected Jews raise additional demands on the Jewish communal profession. For the past ten years we have seen a number of fundamental shifts begin to change and influence the framework in which the Jewish community functions.

Forces in the general community appear to be changing rapidly the status

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and place of the Jewish community in its associations with governments and other ethnic/religious bodies. Five specific indicators seem to be altering these past traditional relations:

1. the assault on pluralism;
2. the rise of religious fundamentalism;
3. the changing dimensions of the media's perception of and relationship with the Jewish community;
4. the challenge of anti-Semitism and the development of new "factories of hate";
5. the loss of moral consciousness regarding the status and history of the Jewish people in the twentieth century

For a moment, let us examine each of these factors. The assault on pluralism has been reflected in the ever increasing church-state litigation and in the emergence of viewpoints from both within the religious and political sectors that have negated the principles of free choice, the concept of dissent, and the respect for minority interests.

The first point is closely related to the second, namely, the rise of religious fundamentalism. We have been witness to a new assault on religious liberty and expression and to the emergence of theocratic leadership bent on capturing political control and imposing its religious authoritarian doctrines over individuals, groups, and nations.

On the third point, no clearer incident of media bias can be cited than the coverage provided of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. That model continues to be reenacted as press coverage reports perjoratively on Israel and Jewish-related items.

Fourth, the flow of anti-Semitism can best be seen, most recently, in the revelations concerning the new "factories of hate" spewing out their messages, linking the plight of the American farmer to the "international Jewish conspiracy."

Fifth, a reverence for twentieth century Jewish history was the hallmark of political consciousness for most of the past forty years, yet these reflections on the Holocaust and on the special relationship of Israel to the United States may be weakening at the base, as new generations of intellectuals and politicians have attacked and rejected the Jewish experience.

Paralleling these general social trends are a number of developments in the Jewish community itself:

1. the loss of Jewish consensus—the weakening of the position of Israel as a unifying force within Jewish life and the corresponding rise of new and alternative interests and priorities;
2. the evolution of competing ideologies and institutions—the presence within the Jewish community of emerging splinter groups and new challenges within the Jewish world to the recognition and status of the various religious perspectives;
3. the changing dimensions of Jewish leadership—older, more experienced leaders, tired and frustrated, giving way to fewer, newer, less Jewishly knowledgeable younger elements, whose interests are more constrained and particularistic;
4. the escalation of pressures on Federation and other institutions—as some traditional organizations fade in membership and activity and as the nuclear Jewish family is weakened by various pressures, increasing demands are placed on Federations to operate in a more global and functional Jewish perspective;
5. the price tag of Jewish living—a significant increase in the financial demands placed on leadership, as well as in the costs associated with

maintaining a family in a Jewish environment.

The past ten years have been marked by these and many other trends. There is the necessity of reminding ourselves that several unique characteristics specifically dominated this period:

1. the growth and maturation of the Israel lobby as a primary American interest group;
2. the reemergence of the American Orthodox establishment as a contender for power within the Jewish community;
3. the transition of Jewish political participants into a community of voters sought after by both political parties;
4. the geographic and demographic shifts of the Jewish population base to the South and West.

The general state of the Jewish community must be viewed as reasonably healthy despite the array of challenges that appear to come against it. The sustaining power of the Jewish community is its memory bank of past failings and the source of pride and hope that Israel still engenders. Like the prophet of old, we continue to dream new dreams and establish new visions.

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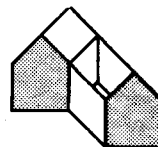
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