

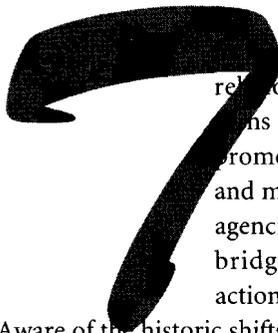
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Analysis

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BUILDING BRIDGES: THE DENOMINATIONS, FEDERATIONS AND JEWISH CONTINUITY

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Historic American separation of the “secular” and “religious” spheres, of federations and congregations, turns out to be vastly counterproductive in the arena of promoting Jewish continuity. Consequently, both CJF and most local federations, as well as JESNA and central agencies for Jewish education, are now trying to build bridges between the separated realms. What about action from the other side of the gap?

Aware of the historic shifts taking place within the federation world—and of the potential for new funding and recognition for their enterprises—both the Reform and Conservative movements have now formally joined the Jewish continuity conversation on the national level with the publication of two documents: “Jewish Education in the Conservative Movement: Leadership in the Continuity Process”, issued in May 1993, and the UAHC Strategic Planning Task Force on Jewish Continuity and Growth’s “Final Report”, dated June 7, 1993.

What do the documents say? What do they not say? And what can *we* say, on reading them, about the movements’ participation in the bridge-building process?

Creating the documents

The movements’ approaches to the task were very similar in some ways. Working groups were convened by each movement in the spring of 1992. Each group met over many months, reacting to individual papers submitted on key topics, discussing and debating issues, and reacting to drafts that summarized their emerging positions. Both documents address both internal movement concerns and an external federation audience. They acknowledge the same demographic trends that undergird the federations’ new concerns about Jewish continuity. They take similar stands regarding the centrality of the synagogue for perpetuating Jewish life.

Yet beyond this, the documents differ greatly, in ways that reflect characteristic differences between the movements. The contrasts between the movements were evident from the beginning, in how the working groups that produced the documents were constituted and what each took as its charge.

The Conservative movement’s group was convened by the leadership of all three arms of the movement, spearheaded by the Jewish Theological Seminary. Its membership represented all the wings of the movement that have anything to do with Jewish education: the Seminary, the Rabbinical Assembly, Camp Ramah, the day and nursery schools, and the United Synagogue Departments of Education and Youth Activities. All but one of the thirteen members were professionals, with the treasurer of the United Synagogue the one lay person. All the members were from the eastern US, and most were from greater New York. The group was chaired by a member from the Seminary. The framework was professional and intellectual.

The Reform movement’s Task Force was more broadly based. It was convened by the UAHC, the movement’s congregational arm. Its 20-some members comprised both lay leaders and rabbis from across the country. The group deliberately included individuals active in local federations, some of whom were not even from the Reform movement. The Task Force was chaired by a lay leader from the Midwest, while a UAHC professional, one of the Regional Directors, was its (staff) director. The framework was communal/congregational, with a focus on application as well as principles.

What do the documents look like?

The Conservative Approach: Programs and Principles

“Leadership in the Continuity Process” begins with ten position papers spanning all areas of Jewish

education—Early Childhood, Synagogue Schools, Schechter Day Schools, Family Education, Ramah Camps, Youth Movements, Israel Experience, College Outreach, Adult Education, and Professional Training. After a brief introduction, each paper details a series of recommendations for strengthening Conservative education in that area. The papers are not arranged in any order of priority.

The recommendations encompass all the themes and programs that every Jewish educator knows are important. This section speaks to one of the purposes of the document, “to stimulate thinking in the Conservative Movement as to what initiatives and directions are required to...make Jewish education as effective as it must be.” The collection taken as a whole is a vision of what the movement dreams of accomplishing in Jewish education. This is the internal agenda: to delineate with a single, official voice the movement’s resources and possibilities, to give local communities and congregations a starting point for discussions internally and with federations.

A movement focus

The vision is very movement centered. With only minor exceptions, the recommendations refer only to programs run under Conservative auspices, often promoting the creation of new Conservative activities where similar programs already exist under other sponsorship. The thrust toward inter-institutional collaboration and community-wide planning, which is an integral aspect of the emerging continuity planning consciousness from a federation perspective, is not acknowledged here.

Besides offering a vision to the movement, the recommendations are funding “wish lists”. Here, the movement’s external audience, the federation, is also being addressed. And, in fact, the second of the document’s stated aims is “to demon-

strate ways in which greatly increased community resources can make a difference”.

I am tempted to characterize this approach as “if you list it, they will fund”. But however compelling the lists are, because they are so comprehensive, and no priorities or possible program sequences are discussed, the recommendations are more likely to overwhelm the reader than to provide guidance for seeking or providing funding.

A new language of cooperation

Issues of relations with federations are explicitly addressed in the second part of the document. Entitled “Jewish Continuity: An Overview and Summary”, it describes the overarching themes and concerns that permeated and framed the group’s discussions. The document first affirms the key role of intensive Jewish education and the centrality of religion and the synagogue in the transmission of a viable Jewish identity, and that it welcomes the federation’s new acceptance of these notions. This is important, but not surprising.

But the final point breaks new ground. The documents here takes a positive position regarding the development of “new relationships and partnerships between the religious community and the federation system”. I believe this may be the first formal affirmation from the Conservative movement of the desirability of a new, partnership-based, approach to federation-denominational relations. This is a foundation on which new bridges could be built.

Having reached out toward cooperation, the document goes on to candidly enumerate four concerns which the Conservative movement brings to its discussion with the federations. There are:

1) a commitment to the value of denominational education;

- 2) the need for support for formative as well as transformational educational experiences;
- 3) the need for a “level playing field” (not privileging federation’s agencies when funding educational programs); and, finally,
- 4) recognition of the resources that the movements and their networks of institutions represent.

These concerns describe significant differences between the perspectives of the federation and congregations. Each of them could be the subject of an entire essay in itself. For now, suffice it to note that federation leadership have here a clear delineation of Conservative congregational perspectives on key issues and thus the basis for some serious dialogues.

The Reform Document: Mission and Pragmatic Partnership

The initial sections of the UAHC Task Force Report are devoted to mission and resources. The affirmation of the centrality of the synagogue is expanded into a discussion of the importance of transforming synagogues into integrated educational environments, welcoming and spiritually nourishing communities. A selection of UAHC programs which are directly related to Jewish continuity and growth are highlighted, offering the Task Force’s vision of what the movement stands for and can offer in support of Jewish continuity and growth. Finally, there is acknowledgement of the need for increased funding from outside the movement. All this makes up the first half of the report.

At this point, the document moves into a strategic, action-oriented mode. Both in language and substance, we sense the influence of individuals who understand the culture and processes of the federation. For example, a discussion of appeals for funding notes that requests for funding from outside sources must

be accompanied by internal review of UAHC activities, with an eye toward putting a lower priority on programs that overlap with activities undertaken by other Jewish or secular organizations, an approach to which any federation allocations committee member would surely be sympathetic.

In Part V (“The Development and Implementation of a Strategic Plan for Jewish Survival and Growth in North America”), the Report develops this approach further. It goes beyond affirmation of the need for partnership between synagogues and Jewish federations, to a forthright discussion of some of the attitudes and approaches that must change if the partnership is to be real. The discussion takes both sides’ perspective on many of the issues which separate the cultures. To quote:

“...Synagogues cannot expect federations to provide funds for...programs of Jewish survival and continuity, such as education programs, and in turn allow synagogues... or movement funds currently appropriated for those programs to be used elsewhere... Synagogues...must also understand that federations see themselves as community builders and cannot be expected merely to provide funds and to remain silent on programs... [and] that there are federation-supported services...congregations can take advantage of ...instead of seeking to duplicate them, just as federations must understand that where there are synagogues services that can be made available to the community on a wider basis, effort should be made to facilitate this rather than duplicating these services.”

A candid list follows of obstacles to the development of partnership. The list includes federation’s tendency to treat the synagogue as just another of its agencies, synagogue difficulties with the concept of

accountability, and negative perceptions that each has of the other’s goal and motives. The list is worth studying.

By way of role models, the Report describes communities in which workable partnerships have been developing. Crucial ingredients for success come from both sides. They include “rabbinic leadership [that] understands the importance of a broader community structure and is involved in that structure”, the ability of “the leadership from...synagogues [in a community] to work together...”, as well as “a federation executive who has an appreciation of synagogue life and is involved in a synagogue”.

Finally, the document recommends numerous specific initiatives that can be undertaken to “educate our synagogue leadership regarding effective ways to conduct their relations with their local federation”. These include workshops at national and regional meetings, development of a manual on creating effective partnerships (with input for CJF!), and working with the other synagogue movements, among others.

In summary, the UAHC’s document emphasizes both principles and pragmatics. Like the Conservative movement’s, it articulates its unique perspectives on Jewish continuity and speaks to what the movement can contribute to efforts to enhance continuity and growth. But it also introduces a balanced discussion of changes that are necessary on all sides to enable the development of working partnerships, and a charge to its members to educate themselves regarding the cultural differences that threaten cooperation.

What next?

The documents are being used differently by each movement. In the UAHC, recommendations based on the Task Force Report were adopted at the movement’s General Assembly in the fall of 1993. As part of the

process of implementation, a new committee on synagogue-federation relations is now in formation, with a lay chair and professional staffing.

The Conservative movement has distributed its document to local communities, to provide a starting point for clarifying their own program priorities if and when they enter local continuity planning ventures. There are no formal movement structures to take this particular process any further at this time.

And although both movements call for inter-denominational collaboration, neither has yet initiated any action in this direction nationally.

But even as we await further activity, the documents provide a constructive starting point for dialogue between federation and denominational leadership, both nationally and locally. Both movements now explicitly affirm the importance of partnership and collaboration—a point that will be of some importance in discussions with local leadership in some communities. Beyond that, the documents reveal some of the real differences between the movements. Awareness of and sensitivity to these differences is essential for successful federation-congregational communication. All of this will be invaluable to all who are building the new bridges of cooperation in support of Jewish continuity. ♣

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Footnotes

1 Individual copies of the documents are available from the office of Rabbi William Lebeau, Jewish Theological Seminary, 3080 Broadway, New York 10027, and from the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 838 Fifth Avenue, New York 10021.