

A FRAMEWORK FOR CONSIDERING EUROPEAN JEWRY'S CHALLENGES

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In recent years, there has been a renewed emphasis on an Europe of nations, rather than on communities, which has been echoed in European Jewish communities. This backlash against diversity and pluralism is partly due to inept Jewish communal leadership and a lack of an effective pan-European Jewish organization.

Two separate questions form the basis of this article. Is Europe becoming a Europe of nations or communities? Is there a crisis facing European Jewry? These two questions prompted me to ask a third: Are these two separate and incompatible questions, or is there some connection between them?

I would argue that there is a strong connection between them, and the key lies in the phrase, "nations or communities" or, to adapt it slightly for the purposes of this analysis, "nation *versus* communities." For just as the first question implies a struggle or a conflict between one and the other, it is helpful to look at the key issues facing European Jewry in terms of the same conflict.

NATIONS VERSUS COMMUNITIES ON THE PAN-EUROPEAN LEVEL

When the European Union (EU) project began, it was indeed a Europe of nations. However, as time passed and a tapestry of agreements, treaties, and institutions was created and, with that, a degree of political and economic cohesion, the center of gravity began to shift toward a Europe of regions, localities, peoples, and cultures—in short, a Europe of communities. With the broadening of the concept of human rights to include (in the words of the European Cultural Foundation's report to the third workshop of the 1998 Hague Conference) "gender, the envi-

ronment, communal self-determination, language, mobility, access to knowledge, cultural expression and participation," people were to be valued and celebrated for their *variety*, not their *homogeneity*.

However, in recent years, disillusionment with and deep unease about the European Union project appear to have become widespread. People fear loss of national or cultural identity, sovereignty, and national autonomy. Together with this fear has come growing anti-immigrant, anti-foreigner, and anti-asylum-seeker sentiment, increasingly expressed through political parties that have achieved some measure of electoral success. We also see the growth of anti-establishment and anti-globalization politics.

The response of national governments, who fear that these developments will lead to the breakdown of social cohesion, is to move back to a renewed emphasis on a Europe of nations, to talk more about national interests, and, while continuing to pursue the European agenda of enlargement and a degree of closer integration, to do so from a narrowing national perspective. Part and parcel of this is the way politicians from the center right to the center left have introduced into their own political rhetoric language designed to appease the anti-immigrant, racist tide. In the London Sunday *Observer* newspaper (October 13, 2002), Will Hutton, writing about the Irish referendum on the Nice Treaty (which enlarged the European Union, opening the way to former communist countries of Eastern Europe and the Baltics to join), characterized these views in this way: "Let's get

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back to the good old nation state and all its totems.”

Therefore, at the pan-EU level, the Europe of nations seems to have the upper hand, and we see this in two recent developments: (1) the proposal to create a post of President of the EU, to be chosen by the Council of Ministers, not by the peoples of the EU, and (2) the power of one nation state—Ireland—to derail the entire European project by voting, again, against the Nice Treaty (a fate avoided when they voted on October 19, 2002).

This process has occurred at the expense of the Europe of communities, and it has been strengthened by the reaction to September 11th. It is a process that will, regrettably, encourage countries to believe in the myth of ethnic homogeneity when in fact all European societies are ethnically and culturally plural. Migration has given and is giving European societies a multicultural character that will not go away.

NATION VERSUS COMMUNITIES ON THE JEWISH COMMUNAL LEVEL

Since the late 1980s and especially since 1989, we have been moving quite rapidly toward a European Jewry that is a community of communities—and not communities in the national sense, but a diverse pluralistic collection of communities based on religious practice, ethnic identification, gender, cultural interests, and so on—reflecting the true diversity of Jews in Europe.

European Jews are becoming increasingly differentiated; there is less homogeneity and more pluralism. This process poses many challenges and problems, which many of us have been trying to respond to and answer in pragmatic, constructive, and practical ways. It is a process to be welcomed, but it takes us into uncharted territory.

However, there are elements in European Jewry who have always felt that these trends are fundamentally inimical to Jewish interests, which they define in very narrow terms. At the top of their list is support for the community's defense and security—“We

have to live as if we are always under threat, and now we are.” Then comes the expression of unquestioning solidarity with Israel, to the point of adopting an attitude of my country, right or wrong. They want the community to speak with one united voice; their one route to high-level action in defense of Jewish interests is through elite relationships with power. Their weapon all too often, is the Holocaust.

Until two years ago these elements *were*, fortunately, becoming increasingly marginalized—not completely and not everywhere, by any means—as we have witnessed new and renewed interest in Jewish culture and heritage, in Jewish history and genealogy, in higher Jewish studies, and in alternative forms of Jewish education and as Jews have chosen a variety of ways of being Jewish and becoming more engaged, *as Jews*, with the societies in which they live.

The events of the last two years—the crisis in the Middle East sparked by the outbreak of the second intifada—have thrown the sustainability of these developments into doubt. Fear, uncertainty, panic, apocalyptic rhetoric about anti-Semitism—these emotional responses seem to have taken over with the result that the initiative in our communities has been recaptured by those who all along believed that Jews are a people who must always dwell alone. They feel vindicated, and they are now obsessed with the issue of improving Israel's public relations, as if this were the answer to all our problems, to the crisis they perceive is now facing European Jewry.

What they offer as a solution—the gift of their leadership—is a kind of mirror image of what our national leaders are offering when they choose that path of a Europe of nations: each national Jewish community united around the twin pillars of defense and complete solidarity with Israel, with those communities working together in Europe to achieve only those ends. All else is considered a distraction. Pluralism, diversity, and open expressions of differences of opinion all undermine the unity required for survival.

I do not underestimate the seriousness of some of the attacks on Jews and Jewish institutions nor of the severe criticism leveled at Israel, but if this is supposed to be the crisis European Jewry faces, it is artificial and fabricated. It serves the interests of those who have always been uncomfortable with pluralism.

NOT A CRISIS, BUT A TIME OF FATEFUL CHOICES

How have we slid from growing self-confidence in our diversity to this notion that we have been thrown into crisis? Two of the main reasons are (1) our natural extreme sensitivity to criticism of Israel and (2) inept Jewish communal leadership in Europe, especially at the national and pan-European levels. As Jewish communities, we have never properly seized the opportunities or responded to the challenges offered by the changes occurring in Europe to embed ourselves even more firmly in the European cultural and intellectual dynamic. Just as the Europe of nations *at the expense of communities* is not the way forward for Europe as a whole, neither is a Jewish Europe—defensively postured, seeing enemies everywhere, organized at the expense of the pluralism and diversity of its communities-within-communities—the way forward for European Jewry.

While I do not believe there is a real crisis facing European Jewry, there is no doubt that we are at a crucial moment and the choices we face in Europe are quite stark. The events of the last two years have sharpened the differences between the two directions we can take.

Despite the apparent restoration of a defensive leadership, I do not see the diversifying trends going away so easily. This process is not so fragile. Traveling round Europe these last three years, my experience is that, at the grassroots, people are continuing to develop Jewish life: education, culture, welfare, how to organize, how to create economies of scale, how to make best use of the Internet and the web, how to deal with the consequences of restitution are the fun-

damental issues with which people need help.

THE NEED FOR EFFECTIVE PAN-EUROPEAN ORGANIZATION

We may be diverse, but across Europe the problems faced are remarkably similar. This situation cries out for us to help each other, to work through problems together, to find common solutions where possible—but for that, we need to be organized effectively on the pan-European level, and we are not. For all the bluff and bluster of recent pan-European Jewish gatherings, we are hopelessly disorganized—both in terms of helping ourselves and in terms of relating to, engaging with, deriving benefit from, and contributing to the wider European project as pursued by the EU.

We have to be frank about our weaknesses. The split between the European Jewish Congress (EJC) and the European Council of Jewish Communities (ECJC) would be farcical were it not so serious in handicapping Jewish progress in Europe. The EJC is supposed to deal with political issues facing European Jewish communities, but is practically moribund; it does very little, yet guards its prerogatives in this area with the backing of its master, the World Jewish Congress. The ECJC is supposed to leave political action to the EJC and deal instead with education, culture, and welfare, but as the organization of choice for most leaders and top professionals in the Jewish voluntary sector across Europe, it has become an ad hoc forum for airing political concerns and expressions of desire for action. Yet without a mandate to engage in political activity, the ECJC cannot respond to this concern. The result is the virtual disenfranchisement of the Jewish population in relation to issues they need to face on the European level and that need to be taken up by community representatives.

This paralyzing split is compounded by the failure of the largest and most powerful communities to pull their weight in European forums, make the kind of contribution that

they are perfectly capable of making to looking after Jewish interests in Europe, or to work seriously together. In effect, their combined inertia acts as a powerful blocking mechanism to progress for everybody else.

In their place we have some overly powerful and overly intrusive organizations from the United States and Israel acting, far too often, in counterproductive ways. Yet we do need good and close relations with Jewish communities in these two centers.

Finally, we often hear grandiose and ambitious hopes for the future from European Jewish leaders, but the knowledge base and the road map to realize these hopes are just not there. Soaring rhetoric disconnected from a full and clear understanding of where we really are now can only lead to disappointment and more lost opportunities.

**OVERCOMING A FALSE DICHOTOMY:
EUROPE'S JEWS MUST EMBRACE
DIVERSITY AND A COMMON AGENDA**

To return to the wider question of the future direction of Europe, the correct path is not to choose between a Europe of nations and a Europe of communities. It should not be either/or. The British writer, Hilary Mantel, put it very well in an essay in the *Guardian* newspaper on October 12, 2002:

We are all . . . members of imagined communities. In the century ahead, shall we transcend nationalism, or accommodate it? There is a sense in which a postmodern world must be a post-nationalist world. But the idea of a nation will be with us for a long time yet, for historically, nationalist ideals have provided ideologies of resistance and emancipation, and in the present sorry state of Europe, I do not think we can reasonably ask thwarted and injured peoples to do without their nationalist ideals, or to ask them to bask in the light of a sunny cosmopolitanism—for them, the day has not yet dawned.

And while the parallel is not exact, the same needs to be said for our European Jewish future. We should not have to choose between nation and communities—between, on the one hand, a narrow, defensive, centralizing, all-speak-with-one-voice/brook-no-dissenting, agenda, and, on the other hand, complete anarchy, where we are so fragmented, so subdivided into communities-within-communities that we cease to be able to come together on anything. If I argue that we need to celebrate our diversity and to base our unity on the desire we have in common to achieve our great variety of Jewish objectives, that does not mean we can avoid, on some issues, developing some common policies vis-à-vis Europe as a whole. Indeed, to do the best for our communities, for the 2 to 2.5 million Jews who occupy the European space, we need to be able to make the most of the fact that as a wider population of this size in Europe, our collective voice has a right to be heard. But we must not pursue an agenda that has little connection with how we live our lives as Jews in Europe and how we relate to and interact with, and contribute to, our European societies.

I end with another quotation from Hilary Mantel. Much of her essay is about how, in Europe, communities have constantly reimagined themselves. There are no static, timeless communities, nations, or people, and this applies to Jews as much as to anyone. She writes:

The greatest hope of minorities, I think, is that they can find a refuge in an imagined Europe of the regions: not in a superstate, a Europe created on the model of past nation states, but within a Europe of diversity in which plural identities can flourish: in which a man is free to define himself as a member of a group or nation, but also to define himself as a European.