

# Changing Jewish Communities

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## SETTING THE TERMS OF REFERENCE: DANIEL J. ELAZAR'S IMPACT ON AMERICAN JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE

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*The Classic Analysis of American Jewry / The Jewish Republic / Five Spheres of Activity / Principles of the Jewish Polity / A Classification System for Libraries of Judaica / The Federation Movement / The Jewish Agency for Israel / Setting the Terms of Reference*

A giant of the twentieth century left us when Daniel J. Elazar succumbed to an illness on December 2, 1999, at age 65. His career was unique, and much will be written of his multifaceted contributions over the decades to the fields of political science and political theory. While he was known in the world at large for his brilliant theoretical work on the nature of federalism and its applications in government in America and abroad, this analysis looks at the wide-ranging impact of Daniel Elazar on the American Jewish community.

### **The Classic Analysis of American Jewry**

Elazar's writings were expansive, his output enormous - authoring, co-authoring, or editing over 80 books and 800 articles. In the field of Jewish communal service and the organized Jewish community in America, possibly his best known and most used book was *Community and Polity: The Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry*. In this oft-cited book, Elazar assays the uniqueness of American Jewry, how that community has adapted to America, and the consequent growth of the organizations developed to respond to its needs. His broad assessment covered the religious, educational, and government-like institutions of the community. First appearing in 1976 and completely revised and updated in 1995 (with both editions published by the Jewish Publication Society of America), this volume became the Bible for anyone who has a legitimate interest in organized Jewish life in America, explaining how it works, why it works, and where it comes from. In it, Elazar tracked American Jewish life for over ten generations, providing an historic context which framed the successive Sephardic, German Ashkenazi, and Eastern European Ashkenazi waves of immigration to the U.S. and the contributions each made to organized Jewish life.

Together with others, he evolved the now common political theory that identifies contemporary Jewish life as a continuation of the covenant (*brit*) that God made with Abraham and with Moses at Sinai. This covenant created a perpetual bond between parties having independent but not necessarily equal status, called upon to share in a common task. A covenant is much more than a contract because it involves a pledge of loyalty and ultimately a moral commitment. Jewish political institutions and behavior over the millennia have reflected this covenantal base in the way that they give expression to the political relationship as a partnership based upon a morally grounded pact.

## The Jewish Republic

In the Bible, the Jewish republic is referred to as the *edah*, from the term for assembly - in other words, a body politic based upon the general assembly of its citizens for decision-making purposes. The original *edah* was literally an assembly of the entire people on constitutional matters, and of the men who had reached military age for other matters.

The Jewish republic had five basic characteristics. 1) Political equality exists for all those capable of taking on the responsibility for the defense of the *edah*. 2) Decision-making is in the hands of an assembly that determines its own leaders. 3) The *edah* is portable and not confined to one place. 4) Nevertheless, for it to function completely, the *edah* needs the Land of Israel. 5) The Torah is the constitution of the *edah*.

Throughout history, the *edah* meeting as a whole or through some representative part has been responsible for actions of a constitutional character, and this included the forming of communities in the modern United States. Elazar identified fourteen historical epochs in Jewish history, with each epoch characterized by a reconstitution of the constitutional base of the community. The American Jewish community is a product of the thirteenth epoch, whose characteristic regime was that of the voluntary association, and which coincides with the modern epoch in world history from 1648 to 1948. It has acquired its present form in the fourteenth epoch, whose major manifestation is the restoration of the Jewish state and the role it has played in reconstituting the *edah* so that the Jewish people as a whole again has a structure. It appears that the community is on the threshold of another major reorganization reflecting the new patterns of Jewish geography and demography of the end of the twentieth century.

## Five Spheres of Activity

Elazar viewed the organizational development of American Jewry in functional terms. From the religious-congregational sphere of the early congregations emerged the four other spheres of influence and activity - educational-cultural, community relations, communal welfare, and the Israel-overseas. These served in place of ideology to provide Jewish America with a substructure, collectively and in its various territorial divisions.

In analyzing the religious institutions and what came to be the Federation system, he pointed out that the other four spheres were heavily influenced by a different psychological and reality-based approach in their roles in Jewish life. The types of leadership most generally attracted to Jewish congregational life tended to be more localistic than was the case in the other spheres. The educational-cultural sphere was shared. Over the course of the last half of the twentieth century congregational schools grew increasingly, and what had been the norm for many communities, a community-wide Talmud Torah system, changed radically. In their stead, the community-wide (read "Federation") world gained great influence in the Bureaus of Jewish Education, often absorbing them as Federation departments. The actual education, however, took place under synagogue auspices.

In the community relations field, the Federations often spawned local Jewish community relations departments or agencies. Their strength waxed and waned depending upon the personalities of volunteers and professionals and the varying levels of power and presence of the American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, ADL, and other national agencies in communities across the country, rather than through the JCRC's inherent automatic role as coordinator and voice of the Jewish community. This was not an unexpected development. Elazar privately seemed to be more attracted to discourse and analysis with or through the American Jewish Committee because of its intellectual and cosmopolitan beginnings early in the century. Yet this did not color his analysis of the roles of JCRCs and the other bodies devoted to community relations issues.

This is partially explained by both Elazar's model of governance in the Jewish community, a kind of elitist republicanism, and those who peopled the American Jewish Committee, who tended to share the same view of governance in Jewish life as he did.

Elazar developed a comprehensive theoretical framework to analyze *all* Jewish communities from biblical times to the present, and based upon this framework he played an advocacy role in the Jewish community for well over a quarter of a century.

Over the millennia, three elites sometimes cooperated and sometimes competed for power and hegemony. The intersecting power between the prophets, priests, and the governing secular authority - the king - has evolved and adapted through time. These changing groups always provided intersecting, sometimes cooperative, sometimes competing, forces of the sources of God's knowledge. These forces were the interpreters and/or appliers of God's covenant in dealing with the secular forces within Jewish life.

Elazar felt these elites in evolving form were the representatives of the community, given that sanction through the trust of the people. Today, in most of the spheres outside of the religious and educational, the primary and often sole elite is economically-based. The lack of balance in community governance between today's three elites - the scholars, rabbis, and the rich - was viewed by him as a dangerous development, and he wrote and spoke about it in many venues.

## Principles of the Jewish Polity

Elazar evolved a theory of the Jewish polity which frames a number of principles:

1. *Voluntary Citizenship* - choosing whether or not to be part of the Jewish community.
2. *Associationalism* - joining the polity through a group or groups who agree to join together to pursue one or more self-selected goals.
3. *Federalism* - relations between and among these associations are largely based on federal and confederal, not centralizing or hierarchical, principles.
4. *Aristocratic Republicanism* - the polity is ultimately responsible to, and sovereignty resides in, the Jewish public as a whole, but leadership is vested in the "aristocracy" or trustees as defined by their readiness to contribute substantial money, when able, and substantial energies to the polity.
5. *Consensual Decision-Making* - decisions are reached by seeking a consensus among active leaders and avoiding conflict where possible.
6. *Shared and Divided Authority* - authority in the polity is exercised by a variety of leadership groups, representing different bases and primary spheres of authority, with no one group monopolizing authority in any sphere of activity.
7. *Brit Arevut* (covenant of mutual responsibility) - a primary purpose of the polity is to insure the well-being of every Jew as an expression of the Jewish principle of mutual responsibility.
8. *Jewish Survivalism* - the second purpose of the polity is to insure the physical, cultural, and spiritual continuity of the Jewish people and religion.
9. *Love for the Land of Israel*.
10. *Respect for Jewish Tradition* - (where Torah is seen as the "constitution" of the Jews).
11. *Hesed* (covenantal love) - love growing out of the covenant beyond the call of duty.

Elazar urged the application of these principles in judging communities and their future.

## A Classification System for Libraries of Judaica

Elazar's global perspective on the Jewish world may be traced to his first job as Librarian for the United Hebrew Schools of Detroit, an exemplary Jewish supplementary educational system headed by his father Albert Elazar, a leading Jewish educator in school systems throughout the American Midwest. Daniel Elazar realized that the general classification systems then in use failed to provide the detailed subclassifications required to comprehensively organize any extensive, modern Jewish book collection. Together with his brother David, he began to develop the Elazar classification system for the arrangement and retrieval of the burgeoning range of

Jewish library materials that were becoming available, with ten major classes and ninety-nine divisions. Today, with publication of the third edition of *A Classification System for Libraries of Judaica* (Jason Aronson, 1997), one is hard put to find a synagogue or Jewish center that does not use the Elazar classification system for its library.

## The Federation Movement

Elazar was especially interested in the Federation movement in America and its partner in Israel, the Jewish Agency for Israel, which represented the governance spheres in the voluntary and semi-voluntary sector. As a frequent scholar-in-residence to the (former) Council of Jewish Federations board and as a popular speaker at its annual General Assemblies, Elazar's thinking also permeated the ideas of those who brought the United Jewish Communities into being. His ideas had great influence as well on some local Federation leadership as they evolved new governance structures. The influence of his ideas was great intellectually but often fragmented in their application.

In a special issue of the *Jewish Political Studies Review* on "The Federation Movement at 100," he lauded the organizational advances of the American Jewish community, but recognized that the lives of the multitude of American Jews were far more shaped by American rhythms than by Jewish ones, a situation which had brought American Jewry to the edge of a religious, cultural, and demographic abyss. Despite the sincere devotion and goodwill of Federation leaders, few had either the Jewish education or the Jewish cultural resources needed to provide the kind of revival needed among American Jews. He often influenced others to be more objectively critical of the Federation movement, feeling it had become too smug and not sufficiently flexible in responding to the new issues facing Jewish life. He felt the domination of one elite in evolving and implementing the American Jewish agenda had dangerous pitfalls.

## The Jewish Agency for Israel

Elazar's assessment of the Jewish Agency took many forms, including criticism, analyses, and projections of new forms and foci. He saw the Agency as a parliament of the Jewish people and argued for a restructuring that would involve the World Jewish Congress, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, World Zionist Organization, and the Federation/Keren Hayesod in a new Jewish Agency structure.

While Elazar's proposals for the restructuring of JAFI were not implemented, serious strategic planning has been undertaken, even as the new United Jewish Communities (a merger of UJA, UIA, and CJF) is conducting its own evaluative assessment of the place and roles of American Jewish money and leadership in the Agency. The leadership seems split on their sense of JAFI's future roles, with much resistance to Elazar's vision of the Jewish Agency as the potential parliament of the Jewish people. For most Americans, JAFI is seen increasingly as a social services agency, but Elazar saw it as the place where Jews who are committed to the continuity of the Jewish people could come together to fight, to disagree, to share, to envision, and to move forward.

## Setting the Terms of Reference

In retrospect, it is safe to say that in America there was great respect for Elazar's ideas and formulations. Many boards and staff, nationally and locally, began to use his vocabulary and nomenclature. *Community and Polity* was referred to constantly in many of the planning and reorganization documents with ideas for change that circulated throughout the country.

The schools and programs of Jewish communal service came together for the first time under the auspices of the [Jerusalem](#) Center. Their faculty and administrators labored together for three years in a project, funded by the Wexner Foundation, to produce a text (*Serving the Jewish Polity*), the first of its kind, which focuses on applying his theories to practice and which is now used as part of the curriculum in all the schools.

The Sephardic community and the Conservative movement also turned to Elazar and the scholars at the Jerusalem Center, utilizing their input for strategic planning, structural changes, and realignment of priorities.

When Elazar spoke, almost everyone listened - and learned. His analytical abilities, together with his visionary approach to Jewish life, excited, stimulated, and sometimes provoked those who thought the most about Jewish life in America and its future.

Today, the increasing centralization of power in the hands of the economic elite and staff raises a warning sign in American organizational life which is paid too little heed. More often than not, centralization of authority has become the norm even though Elazar demonstrated how decentralization in governance was increasingly the norm throughout the world.

This cursory overview of Elazar's influence on and in the American Jewish community over the last three and a half decades does not do full justice to him and his thinking. Yet even with that caution and limitation, it is impossible to name any other person so frequently quoted or referred to. He served as a reservoir of ideas and stimulation with regard to the evolution of organized American Jewish life since the early 1960s. His knowledge was encyclopedic, his widespread interests legion, his memory prodigious, his historic perspectives unmatched.

This giant was a teacher and inspiration to many throughout the world. It is difficult to believe that another like him will come upon the scene in our lifetime. Fortunately for American Jewry, his writings will live on. May his memory be a blessing.

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