



המרכז הירושלמי לענייני ציבור ומדינה
Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

by *Steven G. Donshik*

Published March 2006

Jewish Political Studies Review 18:1-2 (Spring 2006)

American Jewry at the Crossroads

American Jewry's Challenge: Conversations Confronting the Twenty-First Century by Manfred Gerstenfeld

Reviewed by Stephen G. Donshik

The dynamics of the American Jewish community are constantly changing along with the issues being confronted both by the broader American society and by the Jewish community itself. To take a snapshot of the community, as Jonathan Sarna points out in his introduction to this book, and begin to understand what is happening at a particular time is useful and important. It provides the opportunity to view both the Jewish community and American society from a special vantage point.

In *American Jewry's Challenge*, Manfred Gerstenfeld offers a unique perspective on this community. Although there is a rich literature on the history, sociology, politics, and communal life of American Jewry, few works by either scholars or popular writers give such a clear and succinct overview of the issues.

The first part of the book sets forth the challenges faced by the community in light of the terror attack of 11 September 2001, the second intifada, the rise in global anti-Semitism, and the second Gulf War. Drawing on a wealth of sources, the author integrates these issues with discussion of the existing trends and future of the American Jewish community. He considers, particularly, the changes that have occurred in American political life, in perceptions of Israel, and in the relationship between American Jews and American Muslims, as well as the deepening Evangelical Christian connection to Jews and Israel.

This section of the book is a painstaking, important exploration of the multifaceted challenges the community faces. It also lays the groundwork for the second part, which consists of interviews with seventeen prominent American Jews. As the author notes, "Selecting interviewees is always difficult. I consulted many experts and finally, as usual, used my intuition. I tried to select a mixture of volunteers and professionals, as well as intellectuals who have made an impact on the Jewish world without holding official positions. These interviewees come from various regions, and their age, gender, and religious views differ."

The Community and Its Issues

The interviews are presented in well organized, readable fashion, and can be faulted only for omissions. The group consists of people who are fifty or older and, with one or two exceptions,

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have occupied leadership positions over the past twenty years. Over the past five years, however, new Jewish groups have emerged worldwide such as Kol Dor and Dor Chadash whose perspectives are also important. There is also an underrepresentation of women and, given the Jewish community's changing nature in regard to professional and lay leadership, of donors and others whose voices need to be heard.

Those who were interviewed, then, are mostly establishment figures who have led the major American Jewish institutions. Their statements offer a telescopic view of what needs to be accomplished. An example is Shoshana Cardin's emphasis on the need for a "vision of direction," implying that the organized community may have lost its way in the process of redeveloping itself. This is reinforced from a different perspective by Rela Minitz Gefen's comments on the well-known fact that "living Jewish is very expensive, and if we want Jews to be educated, be involved, and become leaders then we have to find a way to make it affordable." These, with Carole Solomon, are the only three women interviewees.

The book makes clear that issues of anti-Semitism, social welfare, Jewish education, the Jewish minority's role in American society, and others need to be addressed. What also needs consideration is how the different parts of the community can deal with these matters in a more unified and effective fashion, and how the community can achieve more unity in general. The author has provided us with the thinking of the "senior deans," and it is now up to the next generation to look toward the future.

This volume cries out for a companion that will focus on the emerging, younger American Jewish leadership.

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DR. STEPHEN G. DONSHIK is director of the Israel Office of the UJA-Federation of New York.

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JCPA, Beit Milken, 13 Tel Hai St., Jerusalem 92107, Israel, Tel: 972-2-5619281 Fax: 972-2-5619112, jcpa@netvision.net.il
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