

The Fragmentation of American Jewry and Its Leadership

Interview with Jack Wertheimer

- In recent decades the national leadership structure of the American Jewish community has moved from a fairly integrated state to one characterized by fragmentation. It is hard to discern whether truly powerful national Jewish organizations still exist, let alone whether these set a communal agenda.
- Among national organizations more frequently cited as leading forces in the American Jewish community were AIPAC, the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and the Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany, all of which address international Jewish needs. While these groups are controversial and cannot claim a broad backing, even less consensus exists when it comes to domestic Jewish policy.
- The locus of organized activity has shifted from the national to the local level, where much of American Jewry's energy is now focused. Synagogues, *chavurot*, federations, educational programs and institutions, as well as grassroots social action organizations and salons seem to appeal, particularly to younger Jews.
- Several leaders of American Jewry are effective heads of their organizations. However, they rarely rise above their own sphere to influence the discourse on broader issues affecting Jewish life.

"In the mid-1970s Daniel Elazar wrote a comprehensive and seminal book, *Community and Polity*, which analyzed the structure of organized Jewish life in the United States.[1] Elazar documented ways in which American Jewry had successfully developed from being highly fragmented to becoming an integrated polity with its own structure for self-governance and leadership. He described the important connections between American Jews and their organizations, how the various spheres of Jewish life came together, and how Jewish organizations intersected with one another."

Jack Wertheimer is a professor of American Jewish history and former provost of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS). Over the past twenty years his area of specialization has been the religious and communal experience of American Jewry since World War II.

He says: "Since Elazar's book appeared thirty years ago, the integration process has largely reversed. The national leadership structure of the Jewish community has reverted to a fragmented state, a condition that might be far more the norm of American Jewish life than the unified structure that briefly held sway during the three decades after World War II.

"In the postwar era, powerful national organizations set the agenda of the American Jewish community. Today it is hard to discern whether truly powerful organizations in American Jewry still exist, let alone whether these set its agenda.

"This raises various questions such as: Are there new organizations that have come into play? And: Has the locus of organized activity shifted from the national level to the local one? There is no doubt that the latter has to a large extent occurred. Much of American Jewry's strength is on the local level. That means synagogues, *chavurot* (small religious fellowships generally focused on prayer and study), some of the local federations, local grassroots social action organizations, educational institutions serving Jews of all ages, and salons now seem to evoke greater enthusiasm, particularly among younger Jews in their twenties and thirties."

Power

Wertheimer reflects: "In historical hindsight it appears that the three decades after World War II were an aberration in American Jewish history. What Elazar described as the integration of the American Jewish community apparently represented a very brief period of unity. The pendulum has swung in the opposite direction and the cohesiveness of American Jewry is much diminished. The forces of dissolution were already present a long time ago.

"To mention one example, it is doubtful whether the United Jewish Communities (UJC), the umbrella organization of the federations, has much power. In its earlier incarnation as the Council of Jewish Federations (CJF) in the early 1990s, there were major discussions about creating a voluntary system of 'continental responsibility' for Jewish needs to be financed through a program of self-taxation for all federations. The CJF aimed to serve as the central address of the American Jewish community and also as its agenda-setting agency. Eventually, the CJF merged with the two key institutions funneling American Jewish aid to Jews abroad, the United Jewish Appeal and the United Israel Appeal, but the new combined entity, the UJC, is a weak agency.

"Few people today, including insiders, consider the UJC to be an agenda-setting body. It is a national institution that has not yet clarified its precise mission and is still looking for an ambitious, yet focused agenda. Equally important, it is beholden as never before to a small number of the largest local federations that fund its activities and now are encroaching on its work, assuming through their own local bodies a far greater role in national and international matters."

Leading Individuals

"My research involved interviewing twenty-five leaders of the American Jewish community in addition to the usual sifting of news accounts and other published information. One question posed in the interviews was: Who would you identify as the leading individuals or organizations of the American Jewish community? It turned out that interviewees had much difficulty answering this question.

"One most commonly cited organization was AIPAC, which has become highly controversial and demonized. Another was the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, which acts on behalf of a range of Jewish organizations to address international issues. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (Joint), which once was considered rather secondary, has also emerged as a major force, as has the Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany by virtue of its extensive financial resources. The Joint is regarded as one of the most effective agencies in our time because of its ability to involve wealthy individuals. It now raises more money directly than it gets from the UJC.

"When I asked about personalities, Abe Foxman was mentioned as someone with great visibility, as was Malcolm Hoenlein. That does not mean, however, they were considered national Jewish leaders or particularly effective. They were mentioned for their visibility. Other organizational leaders such as David Harris of the American Jewish Committee (AJC), Ruth Messinger of the American Jewish World Services, Steven Schweger of the Joint, and Eric Yoffie of the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) were cited by peers as highly effective leaders in their particular spheres, but not as individuals who had a platform transcending their agencies. The difference between visibility and impact must be investigated in more detail if we are to assess Jewish leadership today. Some of the most effective Jewish leaders are barely known, including those who run AIPAC or the Joint.

"The situation today is much the same as in the 1990s. Then as now, it was hard to identify people with a broader vision. I hope a new leadership will emerge, even though I am not convinced the times favor such a development."

No Longer a Wall-to-Wall Consensus

"Another question to ask is whether organizational power affects the ability to set the agenda. One major change concerning the American Jewish community is that it no longer has a clear agenda. Over fifteen years ago, Arthur Goren, then a professor of American Jewish history at Columbia University, wrote an important essay on 'A "Golden Decade" for American Jews,' which he defined as the ten years after World War II.[2] In my view, though, that period extended much longer.

"Goren argued that there was a virtual wall-to-wall coalition of American Jewish organizations in the postwar period that had achieved consensus on communal goals. That consensus rested on two pillars. The first was support for Israel, which was portrayed to the American public as a bastion of democracy surrounded by autocratic regimes. The second was the liberal agenda, which then meant fighting against any form of discrimination in employment and housing.

"There is no longer such a wall-to-wall consensus on Israel. Most Jewish organizations support Israel but there is much internal dissension as to the best way to offer that support. How much should American Jews back the policies of Israeli governments; to what extent should they serve as loving or not-so-loving critics? Recently the Conference of Presidents came out in favor of maintaining the unity of [Jerusalem](#) in any settlement reached with the Palestinians. Yet some of its largest constituent members complained about that statement, the main one being the Union for Reform Judaism. This is one example of the major fault lines regarding Israel in the American Jewish community."

Criticism from the Right and Left

"The same is true with respect to the liberal agenda. The emergence of the neoconservatives and the evolving understanding of what it means to be a liberal in America have challenged the American Jewish community's positions on church-state separation. Some Jews now would like to see greater flexibility in how separation is applied. Similarly, the community is split over affirmative action with some arguing that it constitutes a form of reverse discrimination. There are disagreements on immigration policy, a hot issue today, and also about the war in [Iraq](#). Some want to push the community to take a public stance opposing the war; others support the president.

"Both the neoconservatives and Orthodox Jews have been active in critiquing the traditional liberal positions. Although the neoconservatives have been influential, it is unclear whether they will remain so. The Orthodox will continue to be dissenters. Recent studies show that when it comes to Arab-Israeli negotiations, the Orthodox community views matters very differently from the rest of the American Jewish population. The same holds true on some aspects of domestic policy, particularly regarding state support for religious schools. Meanwhile, some groups on the Left view the Jewish community as too conservative or too moderate and would like to see it move toward more left-wing positions.

"For example, in a recent *New York Times* article Prof. Eric Alterman castigated the American Jewish leadership for being out-of-step with the masses of American Jews who are far more liberal on both foreign and domestic issues. The attacks thus come from both the Right and the Left. That Alterman, who teaches English and writes for *The Nation*, is not very active in Jewish life is not as significant as his access to the *Times* and ability to manifest how fractured the American Jewish community has become over domestic and international policy.

"The strength of the American Jewish leadership structure until the period that Elazar dealt with was predicated on a consensus. While that consensus has not entirely disappeared, it has certainly eroded. It is hard to know whether and, if so how, a new consensus will emerge. There is a major emphasis in the Jewish community today on diversity, inclusiveness, and bringing in different populations. This hyper-attunement to every identity group within the Jewish community makes it even more difficult to imagine how American Jews will be able to build consensus at a time when there are so many subgroups, each demanding special attention to its interests.

"Thus more and more voices claim that those who speak for American Jews do not represent them. One hears this complaint within the establishment as well. The Union for Reform Judaism through its Religious Action Center, for instance, has become much more confrontational, as evidenced by its critique of other

organizations for refusing to publicly denounce the war in Iraq or castigate the administration for its choice of Supreme Court justices. This lack of consensus and fragmentation makes it impossible for a national leadership structure to function as it did in times of unity."

The Survival of Organizations

When asked what the current agenda of organized Jewish life is, Wertheimer replies: "Unfortunately much of it concerns the survival of existing Jewish organizations. Agencies feel compelled to justify their utility and to stake out their own turf; not surprisingly in such a climate, it is hard to come together to work toward common ends. In addition, more and more new Jewish bodies have come into existence. Thus all organizations are struggling to survive. One consequence is that all have to devote far more time to fundraising than ever before. They then have far less time to allocate to clarifying their mission.

"At the same time, professionals can rely less and less on lay leaders to be active partners in soliciting funds. This creates a vicious circle. The more some organizations are perceived as trying to ensure their own survival, the less attractive they are to donors. They have to compete with those who have a clear, powerful mission that appeals to philanthropists. The other side of the coin is that in order to differentiate themselves these agencies are sharpening their differences. That is yet another factor making it more difficult to work together.

"The community-relations sphere has always been one where organizations have competed with each other. This was true for bodies such as the AJC, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), and the American Jewish Congress (AJCongress), all three founded in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The AJCongress had petered out to the verge of collapse, but was rescued by one or two individuals with enough money to keep it going for some years. Depending on its current benefactors, the Congress veers in one policy direction or another. Its finances are as unstable as its point of view. B'nai Brith is another organization that is struggling to define what it stands for."

The ADL and AJC

"Many Jewish organizations are trying to reposition themselves. In the Jewish community-relations area the ADL and the AJC are by far the strongest, with the former having a slightly larger budget. They have tried to divide the world into different spheres to avoid stepping on each other's toes. The ADL deals basically with anti-Semitic incidents and the fight against discrimination. The AJC has a much broader agenda of winning friends for the Jews and Israel around the world. Yet both are heavily involved in the battle against the anti-Zionists. They deal with European manifestations of anti-Zionism and other forms of anti-Semitism.

"In recent years the AJC has focused far more on opening offices abroad and making friends in Europe and Asia. It will be interesting to see whether the ADL will take that route as well.

"The AJC is a membership organization whereas the ADL subsists on donors. It is not clear how much of these organizations' funds come from non-Jews. This is fascinating but one has to wonder what its impact will be. Possibly these organizations will broaden their mandate to confront all forms of discrimination and will be less preoccupied with anti-Semitism."

The JCPA

"The Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA) which is yet another organization in the field of communal relations has also gone through many shifts in focus. In its current manifestation it is much more involved in issues concerning Israel than it was 15-20 years ago. It also takes a stand on environmental questions.

"On the other hand it has become more circumspect when it comes to hot-button issues. Major Federation donors who support the JCPA have become far more diverse in their outlook. Some large

federations have demanded that the JCPA avoid taking controversial positions on domestic policy matters that are divisive. Perhaps, its greatest accomplishment in recent years was its work with mainline Protestant churches to persuade them not to support divestment from Israel.

"On church-state and family issues the Union for Reform Judaism and the National Council for Jewish Women take the most extreme positions and try to push the Jewish community to favor the left-liberal side of the political spectrum. The JCPA has donors who line up on both sides and therefore must be more prudent than it was in the past, to my mind a healthy development."

The Reform Movement

Wertheimer goes on to discuss the major religious organizations. "There, too, there is fragmentation. As in the federation world, national organizations in the religious sector have generally become weaker.

"The Reform movement is the largest and its structure is also the most cohesive. But, having insisted on widening its tent to intermarried families, it faces difficult challenges. A recent survey the movement sponsored showed that half of all children in schools under Reform auspices have a parent who was not born Jewish. How the movement will address this vast population and win them over to Jewish life and a commitment to the Jewish people is one of the great challenges confronting Reform today. Its survey also demonstrated the dramatic falloff in enrollment after bar/bat mitzvah, so that only a small fraction of teens in the movement is receiving a Jewish education.

"The Reform movement has bet its future on 'autonomy,' the belief that every Jew decides for himself or herself how to live as a Jew. If the movement cannot generate a passion for Jewish engagement, its current strength will be a passing phase. Still, to return to the theme of national purpose, the Reform movement through its URJ is the most cohesive and focused of all the religious movements."

The Conservative and Orthodox Movements

"Both the Conservative and Orthodox movements are considerably more fragmented than is Reform. As a result, bodies such as the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and the Orthodox Union wield scant influence among their own constituents. Most members of Conservative and Orthodox synagogues have no idea what these organizations do. Individual congregations in each movement and local schools and summer camps are often highly successful, but this does not translate into national cohesion. The strength of these movements is far more on the local than the national level.

"The Jewish seminaries and universities are all struggling to figure out how best to train religious leadership-rabbis, teachers, cantors, and communal workers. The world has changed so much that they do not know how to balance more classical Jewish learning with vocational training. I do not think most of my colleagues at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) have a great impact on Conservative synagogue life. The same is true for the role of Yeshiva University (YU) in the life of Orthodoxy. A vast gap separates the seminaries from the congregations.

"The new yeshiva Chovevei Torah, headed by Rabbi Avi Weiss, was founded as a counter-YU. It strives to train the next generation of Orthodox pulpit rabbis. Chovevei Torah also competes with YU for money. The latter is trying to play catch-up. The competition is shaking things up."

When asked who plays an ideological role, Wertheimer answers: "American Jewry is not very ideological. That is perhaps why the Reform movement, which has little ideology, is so successful. In the Conservative movement, ideology is up for grabs and that will be one of the great challenges for Arnold Eisen, the new chancellor of JTS.

"If one reads the current publications of the religious movements, three iconic figures are constantly invoked: Rabbis Yosef Ber Soloveitchik, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Mordechai Kaplan, who broke away from the Conservative Movement to start Reconstructionism. These individuals ceased to contribute

more than twenty years ago and no replacements have emerged. In the religious sphere, the influence of most national organizations also has diminished."

Grassroots Organizations for Younger Jews

"The most exciting developments in religious life are taking place locally. Hundreds of synagogues are trying hard to revitalize themselves. The new buzzword is synagogue renewal, and every congregation now casts itself as a 'caring community.'

"There are now organizations that aim to help in this very active process. These include Synagogue 3000, which is oriented mainly to research on how congregations improve themselves, and Synagogue Transformation and Renewal (STAR), which offers practical suggestions on how synagogues can get more people into their building on Shabbat. Some synagogues are also turning to Christian groups that have been active longer in the field of revitalization to learn from their techniques. A few synagogues are in touch with mega-churches, which sometimes have up to 25-30,000 members, to understand what they do right.

"Younger Jews are establishing grassroots *minyanim* (prayer groups) in many of the larger cities; some eighty of them have so far been counted, founded by and for Jews in their twenties and thirties, mainly singles. There are salons opening now, which also have a social aspect. In addition grassroots organizations engage in social action efforts, enabling Jews who want to provide community service to volunteer and lobby under the flag of Jewish agencies. Increasingly Jewish environmental organizations are active as well.

"Individually all these bodies are limited in scope. Collectively, however, they tell a story of many new agencies arising locally to create opportunities for Jews to engage with causes they favor. The national organizations are trying hard to figure out how to win over Jews who support local initiatives. In short, the overall picture is not one of American Jewry without organizations; on the contrary, ever more groups are emerging. Rather, Jewish organizational life shows vitality on the local level, less so nationally."

Jewish Education Leads the Way

Wertheimer concludes discussing the weakness of the national structure by referring to developments in the field of Jewish education. "Unlike the other spheres of American Jewish communal life, the field of Jewish education has grown *more* cohesive, rather than less, over the past twenty years. This is counterintuitive because Jewish education is fundamentally a local enterprise, with schools, camps, and programs generally established and run by locals.

"Although this remains the case, over the past twenty years a spate of new national organizations have emerged that serve as umbrellas for all the major divisions in the field -- day schools, supplementary schools, summer camps, early childhood programs, youth movements. Their creation is largely the work of philanthropists with vision.

"This suggests that national leadership is possible, particularly when consensus is achieved around key goals. The reintegration of our badly fragmented national community will come when we formulate a new vision of what the larger enterprise must achieve and how it will address the internal problems besetting American Jewish life."

Interview by Manfred Gerstenfeld

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[1] Daniel Elazar, *Community and Polity* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1976).

[2] Arthur A. Goren, "A 'Golden Decade' for American Jews: 1945-1955," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, Vol. 8 (1992).

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Jack Wertheimer is the Joseph and Martha Mendelson Professor of American Jewish History at the Jewish Theological Seminary. In 2007 two of his edited volumes appeared: Family Matters: Jewish Education in an Age of Choice and Imagining the American Jewish Community, both published by Brandeis University Press.