

## Jerusalem Letter / Viewpoints

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# SEPTEMBER 11: ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR AMERICAN JEWRY

Steven Windmueller

*September 11: A Catalyst for Reassessment / The Human Dimension/  
Institutional Challenges / Changing Political Realities / Universalism vs.  
Particularism / Effects of the Second Intifada and 9/11 / Some Closing  
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### September 11 - A Catalyst for Reassessment

Martin Buber wrote: "Each Jew represents the mirror image of the collective soul of the Jewish people." In recent times, we have described ourselves as a proud people, assured of our place in the modern world. But the events of September 11 left us numbed and confused as to its meaning and message. The tragic events of that day fused with the events that occurred a year earlier in Israel with the onset of the second intifada, and may have fundamentally transformed the Jewish experience in our times.

The events that unfolded on September 11 while directed against the United State and Western civilization had profound implications for American and world Jewry. Over the course of the past several years that historic moment along with the impact of the second intifada has provided a framework for new global attacks on Israel, Jews and Jewish institutions. Today, in response, we are seeking to defend the essence of who we are as a people and as a civilization.

Reflecting on this historical time and its transformational moments for the Jewish experience, historian Steven P. Cohen, writing for *Sh'ma Magazine* (May 2002), surmised that: "We are now on center stage. We must write our own lines. Today there is a kind of collective consciousness binding Israel and America together." The recent events have fundamentally transformed our self-perception as American Jews and our partnership with the people and State of Israel. We need to examine these events and the American Jewish response to them through three distinctive frames: the

human dimension of this moment in time; the institutional challenges thrust upon us by these new *times*; and the changing political realities that we need to understand.

These frames translate into three underlying, coordinate principles:

1. On the human level, American Jews have been described as one community. Today however, we ought to be seen as multiple communities with competing voices. A by-product of this new social reality is the absence of a national voice of Jewish leadership.
2. This community has undergone a gradual metamorphosis; once an integrated communal system anchored by federations, it has become a series of competing centers of power and influence.
3. Reflecting upon the changes in the American and international political environment, American Jews have begun to explore and adopt divergent political positions. Simultaneously, external events have forced American Jewry to confront an entirely new gallery of political challenges.

## **The Human Dimension**

Our stories about the impact of that fateful September day allow us to fill our diaries with personal reflections together with shared tales of the meaning and the impact of those difficult moments on where we are and what we feel.

The human dimension reveals multiple "voices," presenting us with powerful, diverse insights into American Jewry's understanding of 9/11. An American Jewish Committee study of responses to the trauma of that September day introduces some important observations about peoples' responses to the impact of terrorism. Certainly, there are those in our community for whom the events did not resonate in their Jewish souls. For others, its Jewish overtones, especially to Israel, were perceived as profound and enduring. That day also exposed voices of individuals uncomfortable with their Jewish sense of self, and in that process, they may have exploited the events to further distance themselves from the communal fate. Religion's role in society and America's place in the world are two themes that shaped not only the core concerns of many Jews but of other citizens as well.

But many of the new communal developments tied to this inquiry are not specifically linked to that moment in September but rather have taken on additional importance in view of these transforming events. Especially, over the last decade, we have witnessed the emergence of new generations of Jews on the American scene. Individuals and families are asking profoundly different questions about their Jewish connection and are displaying significantly

different patterns of affiliation in expressing their Jewish journeys. Steven M. Cohen and Arnold Eisen in their work *The Jew Within* have begun to help unravel the characteristics of some of those generational stories; demonstrating how younger Jews are redefining and recreating their own Jewish roadmaps. Similarly, the most recent survey of American Jewish attitudes with regard to Israel revealed that 'younger Jews,' under 35, were far less likely than their elders to describe themselves as 'emotionally attached' to Israel to begin with, with only 60 percent saying they were 'very' or 'somewhat' emotionally attached, compared to 81 percent of Jews over 65."<sup>1</sup>

Another essential component is the coming of age of a whole generation of 'new American Jews' who in time will alter the demographic and cultural norms of the American Jewish community. These new voices include Jews from various lands, the former Soviet Union, Israel and the Mediterranean region, Iran, South Africa, and the Americas. In Los Angeles, for example, they currently comprise nearly one-fourth of the Jewish population and they are reshaping the institutional and political character of the community. On the other hand, for many of the individuals coming from totalitarian regimes, the September events evoke old fears, reconnecting them to memories of past moments where the bane of anti-Semitism jeopardized their status and safety. It is important to note however, that all these people address their personal and political ideas through the cultural lenses of their respective communal histories.

The absence of Jewish leadership is also an important factor of the human dimension. There is a cacophony of institutional voices, disconnected and lacking a focused message. Of course, this leadership vacuum is in part tied to the changing social and demographic composition of the American Jewish community. As opposed to earlier periods in the American Jewish story, we are a community devoid of great statesman as Louis Marshall, profound visionaries such as Stephen Wise or eminent thinkers and teachers as Abraham Joshua Heschel. As with much of the leadership during the latter half of the past century, we lack that special voice of accountability or great vision. The history of this era will relate that we were bereft of such voices at a time when we craved guidance and sought leaders.

## **Institutional Challenges**

The second frame, the institutional one, focuses upon the profound demographic changes that preceded the trauma of September 11. The mythology of "we are one" has long since vacated the Jewish center stage. Our geography, our ethnicity, our generational disparities and our political attitudes are all indicative of a loose collection of distinct Jewish communities.

While federations were once perceived as the power-center of Jewish life, the attendant notions of institutional authority may no longer hold the same validity. Part of this organizational shift of power is linked to the process of generational drifting. Many Jews today are searching for a belief that is both holistic and personally meaningful. They now ask their questions in the first person, unlike their parents or grandparents whose concerns were expressed through the medium of the collective character of the Jewish people. The communal notions defining the post-1967 generation of American Jews that gave support to the federation system have been replaced by generation x'ers and y'ers, and elements of the baby-boom culture, which identify as Jews through personal rather than communal frames of reference.

Beyond the evolving generational patterns of participation, one currently finds a variety of new institutional contenders, challenging the federation system by providing alternative participatory models. The emergence of new Jewish "funders", a heightened level of entrepreneurial practice, and the impact of innovative technology and marketing tools have contributed to both growth and change within the communal enterprise.

Some of these institutional challenges, as mentioned, are geographically based. Clearly, there are new centers of Jewish influence competing for recognition with the "eastern Jewish establishment." The "East-West" contest for predominance has been a significant factor in shaping institutional politics, covering several decades and involving a variety of national institutions engaged in organizational contests with their regional constituencies. These communal challenges received dramatic expression in New York and Los Angeles, and their vibrations reach numerous other locations on the American continent.

A serious commitment to institutional research and planning seems to have given way to the more immediate demands for financial growth and a heightened focus on institutional marketing and public relations campaigning. The absence of a national Jewish think tank, or a serious commitment by organizations to initiate strategic planning or community-building programs, presents a major challenge for the American Jewish community, a challenge that could have profound policy implications for the community's future. While there are both community and national models of organizational transformation, there appears to be but a minimal effort being made to monitor, evaluate, and duplicate these new institutional experiences. Here, I cite *inter alia* the structural initiatives launched by Hadassah, the leadership transformation of Hillel, and the organizational planning efforts developed by the Jewish Community Centers Association. All of these represent attempts to re-examine institutional mandates and practices with the intention of establishing alternative organizational models. Similarly, the visionary leadership of Barry Shrage, the President of Combined Jewish Philanthropies

of Boston, has led to the reemergence of the community federation model.

## Changing Political Realities

The third of these outcomes is related to the political changes affecting Jewish life. One of the keys to understanding the American electorate, and more specifically the Jewish voting public, is an understanding of the loyalty patterns of voters to a particular party or to a core set of political values.

In this context, the fall-out over the second intifada has possibly been of greater significance for the Jewish electorate than the impact of 9/11. This fall out is expressed by the resurgence of European anti-Semitism, the radicalization of elements of Islam with its attacks on Jews and Judaism, and the reappearance of historical denial and *transparent political hypocrisy* which seeks to debunk the right of the Jewish people to its national homeland. All of these have contributed to a covert political shift amongst American Jewry.

The electoral impact of external events is particularly evident against the backdrop of the battle against international terrorism. The traditional Jewish Republican base is mounting an increasingly aggressive effort to enlist new Jewish voters, building its case around the strongly pro-Israel positions of their party and its elected leadership, and its endorsement of domestic causes such as the support for charitable choice and parochial aid. No doubt, in preparation for the 2004 presidential election, the White House will seek to develop a Jewish strategy directed at the ten key states with high-density Jewish populations. There is some basis for the Republican belief that this time they may be more successful in their efforts. In an April (2002) Luntz Research Poll, 48 percent of the Jews questioned stated that they "would consider voting for President Bush" for re-election. The poll further found that Bush's performance moved 27 percent of these voters to state that they *were more likely* to vote for Republicans for other offices too. Despite these recent developments in voter attitudes, the Gallup Organization's polling data over an eighteen-month period offers a somewhat different picture of Jewish party affiliations. In that study, 50 percent of Jewish voters classified themselves as Democrats, while only 18 percent identified as Republicans.

Another parallel development is Senator Joseph Lieberman's entrance into the Presidential campaign. How will his candidacy affect the American public and more specifically, the Jewish community? Based on the 2000 elections, the Senator's contribution as the Vice-Presidential nominee was regarded by many political analysts as an asset. While general polling data showed no significant evidence of an increase in anti-Semitism as a result of his nomination, some older Jewish voters still expressed reservations, fearing that such a high profile role for a Jewish politician might engender the potential for the accusation of

dual-loyalty.

American Jewish political behavior can be explored through what is being introduced here as the "*Seventy-Year Jewish Election Cycle*." Namely, from 1860-1930, American Jews demonstrated through their voting patterns an overwhelming and consistent connection to the Republican Party. Lincoln's image and impact helped to create that level of party loyalty for Jewish voters. Similarly, the *Roosevelt effect* would hold the Jewish vote in alignment with the Democratic Party over this last seventy-year period (1932-2002). The percentage of Jewish support for the Democratic nominee over the course of this period has consistently been in the 75 percent range, at times approaching 90 percent. This pattern of loyalty has been particularly reflected in House and Senate campaigns where since the 1970s Jews have voted in overwhelmingly numbers for Democratic candidates (in excess of 80 percent). However, such uniform patterns of political behavior are not reflected in local and state elections, where Jews have increasingly divided their ballots among candidates for governor (as, for example, in New York, 2002) and for mayoral candidates (as, for example, in the last decade in New York and Los Angeles for Republicans Rudolf Gulliani and Richard Riordan). Over time, Jewish voting patterns in these and other state and city-based elections have tended to reflect different outcomes, pointing to the possibility of a shift on the national political scene.

The general specter of Jewish political participation may serve as an excellent barometer of the integration and acceptance of Jews into mainstream American society. The significant number of elected Jews in public office (currently, for example, 11 United States Senators, and over twenty members of the House of Representatives, along with the recent election of the first Jewish Republican Governor in Hawaii and the Democratic Governor of Pennsylvania) reflects the significant and continued Jewish involvement in the political process, attesting to the credibility of Jewish candidates amongst the American public.

## **Universalism vs. Particularism**

Since the mid-1960s we have observed *two distinct political tendencies* in American Jewish life. One addresses the "universal" concerns of this society; it grew out of the opposition to the Vietnam War, and over time formulated its agenda upon the principles of political liberalism aligned with Jewish values and ideas of social justice. The second, reflecting and representing the unique and particular experiences of the Jewish people in the twentieth century, gravitates towards a more "particularistic" agenda. The latter group's conception of "Jewish interests" and its general agenda are governed by the

age-old concern, "is it good for the Jews?"

Both tendencies have competed on the American Jewish stage for nearly forty years, often with the "Israel issue" occupying center stage. Viewing the rivalry in its historical context, it is important to recall that while many American Jews opposed United States Vietnam policy, Jewish leadership as a whole sought to isolate Jewish dissent; it feared that the Johnson Administration would exploit anti-war activism to punish Israel by withholding diplomatic and military support in 1967. One can currently discern a similar manifestation of this political schism being played out with reference to United States policy toward Iraq. Among the other intriguing questions raised by this debate is the perennial question of whether and when is it appropriate for American Jews to publicly criticize the policies and practices of the Israeli government.

## **Effects of the Second Intifada and 9/11**

In addition to the various aspects of the internal debate, there are also specific political results of both the second intifada, and 9/11. Our first observation concerns the level of discourse between Moslems and Jews in the United States. Earlier interfaith and interethnic initiatives involving elements from these communities, especially those that were the product of the Oslo Accords, have either been terminated or severely curtailed and weakened over the last few years, due to the disengagement of key players, external criticism from opponents who view such connections as detrimental to Israel and the Jewish community, or others who question the value or benefit gained from such discussions. Islamic presence in American is continually growing, posing a challenge to the American Jewish community, however the numbers of its faithful seem grossly exaggerated. Despite current difficulties in formulating an on-going dialogue, the two communities have an opportunity to develop a shared agenda concerning the protection of civil liberties of citizens, policies related to the separation of church and state, and immigration concerns.

This subject of interfaith dialogue prefaces a far broader discussion of the general state of Christian-Jewish relations in the United States. This is especially true today, when many mainstream churches that historically identified themselves with domestic Jewish priorities, have adopted anti-Israeli positions in the wake of the second intifada. At the same time, American Jews remain divided over whether to embrace Christian evangelicals and their pro-Israel positions, in light of that community's more problematic theological notions and its domestic agenda.

The second observation is the growing realization that Arab-American groups have benefited from studying and emulating the lobbying and organizing experiences of the American Jewish community. In some measure, that

community has moved beyond the Jewish communal system in three principle areas: promoting campus and grassroots organizing initiatives, developing coherent and resonating messages for target audiences, and introducing a new generation of articulate Arab-American leaders. The model that historically characterized the Jewish lobbying community was based upon an elite-oriented approach, which focused upon five essential targets. These included elected and appointed government officials, key civic and religious figures, business and labor leaders, and academic and cultural representatives. This "top-down" policy differs from the strategies of community-based activism now being developed by Arab American institutions.

Following the Oslo Accords, a third reality became significant. A number of Jewish civic and community relations' organizations began to dismantle the institutional infrastructures that traditionally lobbied for Israel. The effect of these structural changes in the mid-1990s can best be understood in the context of a whole generation of young American Jews unable to effectively articulate the case for Israel to their peers. Possibly more disturbing, as noted earlier, is the corresponding decline in the levels of commitment on the part of this generation of American Jews, who are increasingly unwilling to view Israel as an integral component of their Jewish identity and focus for communal responsibility.

The fourth observation concerns the changing demographic character of American society. The influx of millions of new Americans does not only reshape this society's cultural and social structures. Ultimately it affects the political composition of the electorate. A recent ADL study exploring Latino anti-Semitism found that 44 percent of that community's immigrant population held negative views regarding Jews and Judaism, in contrast to significantly lower numbers among those Hispanics born in the United States. The challenge for the Jewish community is to construct new frameworks for interethnic civic relationships and to forge new political alliances with Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans, for it is these ethnic communities that will shape the dynamics of urban politics.

## **Some Closing Reflections**

Leo Baeck reminded us, that if Judaism did not exist, the world would need to create such a community. He wrote that: "We are God's stake in human history. Judaism bears witness to the power of the idea as against the power of mere numbers....The mere fact that Judaism exists proves the invincibility of the spirit."

The events of September 11 may represent yet another significant terminal in our historical odyssey, connecting us to our roots and refocusing our



communal enterprise on the challenges ahead. The story of the American Jewry at the turn of this new century is in many ways the re-enactment of this community's experience a century earlier. The Jewish enterprise at the beginning of the twentieth century encountered competing voices and new ideas that challenged the leadership of that period to construct compelling messages and create credible religious, cultural and civic institutions that would serve American Jewry for a century.

As we enter the twenty-first century, fraught with a different set of concerns, our leaders will once again have to listen to the multiple voices and narratives that are now transforming our communities. Deciphering this story exposes the numerous organizational challenges confronting our traditional notions of the meaning and place of community. Similarly, the story is also about our entry onto the stage of politics and power, a world formerly off-bounds for Jews, but which now symbolizes an environment in which our community displays its true comfort with American society. Ultimately, this is the story of a community's effort to align itself with both the American experience and the Jewish journey in the world.

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### Note

1. Steven M. Cohen conducted this survey under the auspices of the Jewish Agency Department of Jewish-Zionist Education in cooperation with the Florence G. Heller/JCCA Research Center, released January 2003.

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Dr. Steven Windmueller is a Fellow of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and Director of the School of Jewish Communal Service, Hebrew Union College, Los Angeles. This *Jerusalem Viewpoints* is based on his presentation at the Jerusalem Center on 24 December 2002.

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