

CHAIM I. WAXMAN

CHALLENGES TO CONSENSUS IN THE CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY

The American Jewish community is frequently portrayed as a consensus community, in which virtually no serious conflict exists. There is much truth to this characterization. As Daniel J. Elazar suggests with reference to the oligarchical but, nevertheless, representative character of the leadership of American Jewry: "They are representative because there is a certain sameness in American Jewry."¹ Some of the reasons for this characteristic may be rooted in the minority experience of American Jewry; others may be traced to what Peter Y. Medding refers to as the "decline in authentic Jewish values";² and still others to American society and culture themselves, which as early an observer as Alexis de Tocqueville considered to be essentially homogeneous.³ Be that as it may, this characterization is somewhat misleading in that it tends to minimize the multitude of sources of serious conflict within the American Jewish community in recent years. This article will explore what appear to have been the most significant issues of conflict which have challenged the organized American Jewish community since the beginning of the 1970s, and the ways in which the community has dealt with them. Nevertheless, as will be indicated, the strategies adopted for dealing with these challenges have enabled the American Jewish community to retain its essentially consensual character, even in the face of conflict.

During the second half of the 1970s there were a number of disparate groups, ranging from Jewish student activists to Rabbi Meir Kahane, founder of the Jewish Defense League, who decried the nature of American Jewish

1 Daniel J. Elazar, *Community and Polity: The Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1976), p. 285.

2 Peter Y. Medding, "Patterns of Political Organization and Leadership in Contemporary Jewish Communities," in Daniel J. Elazar (ed.), *Kinship and Consent: The Jewish Political Tradition and Its Contemporary Uses* (Ramat Gan: Turtledove Publishing, 1981), p. 285.

3 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1969).

leadership and the structure of the organized American Jewish community. Their basic grievance was that the communal organizations and their leadership were undemocratic because the organizations were unrepresentative of broad segments of American Jewry, that they were deaf to dissent, and that their leadership consisted of a self-appointed and self-perpetuating elite. Kahane's strongest attack was on the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, an umbrella group which focuses upon Israel-related issues. Kahane charged that this organization selects its constituents undemocratically, through "the rather ingenious trick of having as member groups, organizations that are themselves umbrella groups, thus in effect strengthening the membership of certain groups that are members of the Conference in their own right."⁴ The Conference, he alleged, only accepts organizations and leaders who conform to its positions, and it is undemocratic, unrepresentative, and detrimental to the interests of American Jewry. Similarly, he charged the Council of Jewish Federations and the National Jewish Community Advisory Council with being undemocratic "tools of the wealthy."

Along the same lines, although from very different ideological bases, a Jewish journal published by members and former members of the Jewish student counterculture published a nine-point critique of American Jewish communal life. In an editorial in the journal, *Response*, Steven M. Cohen, a sociologist now at Queens College, in New York, asserted that Jewish communal leaders view democracy "as an impediment to efficient operation"; that Jewish life is exclusionary in that it encourages the involvement of "the financially well-to-do, the males, the middle aged, the businessmen," but discourages the involvement of "the middle and working classes, women, young people (40 and under), intellectuals, and others"; that the communal structures reward those who assent and contribute to the smooth-functioning of those structures and punish those who challenge it; that communal life is localistic, parochial, and informed by business and management philosophy; that American Jewish diplomacy is the hand-maiden of Israeli foreign policy; that "the bearers of Jewish morality are slow to condemn Jewish immorality"; that "religious life is stagnant"; that "synagogues are mostly dull and cold"; that Jewish education is largely "insipid and uninspired," and that Jewish teaching is largely "a second job and not a career."⁵

4 An advertisement, under the heading, "Democracy in Jewish Life," which Kahane placed periodically in the Brooklyn-based weekly, *The Jewish Press*, and other publications, during 1975.

5 Steven M. Cohen, "On Our Minds," *Response*, Vol. IX, No. 3 (Number 27), Fall, 1975, pp. 3-5.

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Although Cohen advocated the formation of a new movement, a "Lobby for Jewish Change," and although there were (and are) many within the American Jewish community who agree with some, if not all, of his charges, the organized movement to challenge the Jewish Establishment which he advocated did not emerge. Rather, there have developed a variety of interest groups, each of which is organized under a banner which acts as a lobby to challenge the established operating procedures of the American Jewish communal structure on one of the specific issues on Cohen's list. Before reviewing the activities of these organizations and movements, it would be instructive more carefully to examine the basic allegation concerning the non-democratic nature of the American Jewish communal structure.

What is democracy? Many definitions have been provided and, essentially, there is an ideological stance in each. One of the ideological issues involved is whether elitism is compatible with democracy. On the one hand, there are those who maintain that the only true democracy is "participatory democracy," in which

... decision-making is the process whereby people propose, discuss, decide, plan, and implement those decisions that affect their lives. This requires that the decision-making process be continuous and significant, direct rather than through representatives, and organized around issues instead of personalities. It requires that the decision-making process be set up in a functional manner, so that the constituencies significantly affected by decisions are the ones that make them and elected delegates can be recalled instantly, doing away with self-appointed elites whose decisions have a broad political impact on the society, but who are accountable only to themselves, or to interlocked groups of their peers.⁶

According to this conception of democracy, the American Jewish communal structure is clearly not a democracy. It is governed by a leadership of professionals and volunteers, some of whom are self-appointed, some of whom are appointed by closed boards, and some of whom are elected by the constituent members of the particular organization but not by American Jewry at large, even though those leaders claim to speak on behalf of and make decisions which affect the larger community of Jews.

On the other hand, there are other conceptions which allow for democratic elitism. Joseph Schumpeter, for example, defined democracy as "that institu-

6 C. George Benello and Dimitrios Roussopoulos, eds., *The Case for Participatory Democracy: Some Prospects for a Radical Society* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), pp. 3-9.

tional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote."⁷ According to this view of representative democracy, the constant participation of those affected by the decisions is not required (nor is it feasible); all that is required is that the power to make decisions be acquired through a competitive struggle for the vote. In fact, the Italian political scientist, Gaetano Mosca, and the German sociologist, Robert Michels, both argued that participatory democracy is unfeasible. Mosca argued that there will always be rulers and ruled, and that among the factors which support the rule of a small elite, or ruling class, is the simple fact that most people are too busy with their own daily personal needs to become involved in politics for any length of time.⁸ Michels argued that there is an "iron law of oligarchy" which is inherent in all organizations. On the basis of his analyses of the labor and socialist movements at the turn of the twentieth century, he concluded that as organizations grow, there is an increasing need for leadership, and that broad-based participation in every decision becomes increasingly impractical. Both the rank and file and the elite are more than happy with the arrangement whereby the few rule, regardless of whether the organization or party was initially conservative or radical. Revolutions, according to Michels, are nothing more than the replacement of one minority-ruled organization by another. Organization, he argued, means oligarchy, or rule by the few.⁹

Any discussion of the allegation that the American Jewish communal structure is undemocratic must commence by emphasizing the voluntary nature of both the community and its constituent organizations. Understandably, therefore, the leaderships of most such organizations are selected exclusively by their memberships and their representatives. Indeed, were one to examine the leadership-selection process in most local and national Jewish organizations, from synagogues to such secular organizations as B'nai B'rith, the many Zionist organizations, etc., it would be very difficult to substantiate the allegation that they are undemocratic in terms of their operating procedures. On the contrary, they would pass the test of democratic procedures with high marks.

As has been indicated, however, criticism of Jewish communal leadership and decision-making involves much more than technical democratic pro-

7 Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, third edition (New York: Harper & Row Torchbooks, 1962), p. 269.

8 Gaetano Mosca, *The Ruling Class* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1939), pp. 281-6.

9 Robert Michels, *Political Parties* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1949).

cedures. An even stronger criticism is that the political process is exclusive, that it caters only to the affluent. Part of the reason for this lies in another of Mosca's explanations of how a small ruling class is able to maintain its rule over the large masses, namely, that most people have neither the time nor the money which would afford them the opportunity for extended involvement in politics. Jewish communal leadership is very time-consuming; it also makes other demands for which most people possess neither the time nor the inclination. As a result, to a large degree the affluent are the leaders by default.

But the criticisms of Cohen and many others are not directed simply and solely at the communal leadership. Perhaps even greater fault is found with the entire communal structure which has become conservative and exclusivist. One need not accept the radical conception of participatory democracy to be critical of exclusivism. Even those holding the more modest view of representative democracy adhere to the goal of the will of the people as manifested by their vote and, that to be truly representative, as much of the citizenry as possible should be included in the vote. While the leaders of American Jewish organizations claim to act and speak on behalf of American Jewry as a whole, without limiting themselves to their own organization's membership, there is a widespread sense among American Jews that the organized Jewish community has turned inward and that it does not reach out to the increasing numbers of Jews who, perhaps because of acculturation and assimilation, are not now affiliated with, or feel uncomfortable with, the communal institutions. Many also feel that the organized community is not responsive to them and their needs and desires. Although there has been no successful coalition of all of the segments of the American Jewish population who experience dissatisfaction with the organized community, a variety of social movements and organizations for change have emerged within the last dozen years or so, and some of them are having impact. One of the most significant of these is the *Havurah* movement.

It is difficult to assign a precise date to the birth of the *Havurah* movement because of its heterogeneity and the fact that it sprang from various sources in different places. First introduced into American Jewish life early in the 1960s via the publications of the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation,¹⁰ the notion of *Havurah* dates back almost 2,000 years. The term means "fellowship," and was represented by two models in the ancient Palestinian Jewish community which emerged in response to the widespread decline in piety among the Jewish masses. One model, created by the Essenes, was located in

10 Bernard Reisman, *The Chavurah: A Contemporary Jewish Experience* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1977), pp. 7-8.

the remote parts of the country, and consisted of small groups of Jews who subscribed to a rigidly ascetic Jewish lifestyle; the other, created by the Pharisees who rejected the idea of removing themselves from the community, was located within the Jewish main centers of population and strove to serve as a means for influencing the religious behavior of the larger Jewish community.¹¹ To some extent, both of these models are represented in the contemporary American Jewish *Havurah* movement. In part, it consists of those who have given up on the established community and, especially, its synagogue structure, from which they seek to remove themselves as far as possible. Others of its membership are establishing fellowships within the community and even within existing synagogues.

Essentially, a *Havurah* is a small community of like-minded families who group together as a Jewish fellowship for the purposes of providing each other with social support and in order to pursue their own participatory programs of Jewish study, celebration, and community service. *Havurot* are generally small, ranging in membership from ten to two dozen families who meet regularly (at least once a month), often in members' homes on a rotating basis.

The first unaffiliated *Havurah*, "Havurat Shalom," was founded by a group of dissidents from the Jewish counterculture in the Fall of 1968, in Somerville, Massachusetts. Most of the founders were young Conservative and Reform rabbis and graduate students in Boston, who "felt estranged from American society, as exemplified by the Vietnam war and mass culture, and from the Jewish community, as exemplified by what they considered to be its inauthentic, bureaucratic institutions."¹² Subsequently, several other similar *Havurot* were founded in New York City and Washington, D.C. Shortly afterward, Rabbi Harold Schulweis, of Temple Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, California, experimented with a synagogue-affiliated model which proved to be highly popular. During the 1970s there was a proliferation of both the independent and the synagogue-affiliated *Havurot*, and in the summer of 1980 the first National Havurah Conference was convened at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, in which more than 350 Jews from diverse backgrounds and denominations gathered to share their Havurah experiences.¹³

According to a study of *Havurah* members conducted by Bernard Reisman, the overwhelming majority are married, under age 45, have somewhat larger

11 Jacob Neusner, *Contemporary Judaic Fellowship in Theory and in Practice* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1972), pp. 1-10.

12 Reisman, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

13 William Novak, "From Sommerville to Savannah...and Los Angeles...and Dayton..." *Moment*, Vol. 6, No. 2, January-February, 1981, pp. 17-21, 57-60.

than average American Jewish families, tend to be more politically liberal than the average American Reform Jew, have higher than average levels of secular education and occupations, have about average levels of Jewish education as compared to other American Jews, are somewhat more religiously observant than the average American Jew, and tend to identify themselves as Reform or Conservative, with only a very small percentage identifying as Orthodox.¹⁴ The reasons for the low rate of Orthodox involvement with the *Havurah* movement may be deduced from Reisman's analysis of the motivations of the members. He suggests that the movement is a response to the cultural conditions of American society which is characterized by loneliness, passivity, dependency and meaninglessness, and that the *Havurah* represents a quest for community, participation, authority, and ideology.¹⁵ Since Orthodoxy stresses high levels of community participation, authority and ideology, it is not surprising that very few who identify as Orthodox feel a need to join a *Havurah*.¹⁶ It should also be noted that Reisman's data indicate that, despite the movement's founders, for the overwhelming majority of its members the *Havurah* is not countercultural.¹⁷ Most of those who join *Havurot* do so not out of an ideological opposition to the dominant American Jewish culture. Rather, they join because they do not find that the existing institutions and their patterns of participation serve their needs. For them, the *Havurah* represents an alternative, more meaningful and satisfying avenue of Jewish experience. It is, as Schulweis suggests, an attempt "to decentralize the synagogue and deprofessionalize Jewish living so that the individual Jew is brought back into a circle of shared Jewish experience."¹⁸

While most American Jews are probably not very concerned with the low level and quality of Jewish education in the United States,¹⁹ some who are have grouped together and formed the Coalition for Alternatives in Jewish Education (CAJE). In 1976 this group issued a proclamation calling

... for substantive structural changes in our classrooms, in order to transform our schools into intellectually stimulating, open and joyful

14 Reisman, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-74.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 26-59.

16 Chaim I. Waxman, "The Sabbath as Dialectic: The Meaning and Role," *Judaism*, Vol. 31, No. 1, Winter 1982, pp. 37-44.

17 For a recent and careful analysis of this concept, see J. Milton Yinger, *Counter-cultures* (New York: Free Press, 1982).

18 Quoted in Harry Wasserman, "The Havurah Experience," *Journal of Psychology and Judaism*, Vol. 3, No. 3, Spring 1979, pp. 180-1.

19 Chaim I. Waxman, *America's Jews in Transition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), Ch. 8.

learning environments for our children and for ourselves. We also encourage such non-classroom learning as study weekends and camping programs, youth movements and *havurot*, programs in Israel and lifetime education. We welcome the emergence of alternative and parent-run schools, as indications of the ferment which is necessary for creative change.²⁰

While the hundreds who attend the annual CAJE conferences come from a variety of Jewish backgrounds, there is a consensus among the conference participants that Jewish education will fail unless it breaks loose from its conservatism and incorporates dynamic new ideas and methodologies which will interest and involve the students in their own education. At the Fourth Annual CAJE Conference, held at Rutgers University in the summer of 1979, the major emphasis of the workshops was on new ways of teaching, with considerably less emphasis on content.²¹ The annual conferences have attracted considerable interest among educators, and are an indication, to some extent, of the validity of Cohen's allegation that Jewish education in the United States is largely "insipid and uninspired." Yet, it remains to be seen how much more successful the alternative teaching methods will be, given the fact that Jewish education is not compulsory. Moreover, one of the most serious problems in Jewish education in the United States today is that it does not attract many dedicated and competent professionals. It remains, in large measure, a second job. One indication of this crisis in Jewish education is the fact that, whereas the tuition in most of the other graduate programs at Yeshiva University costs many thousands of dollars per year, that in Jewish studies is considerably less expensive and, yet, there are relatively few students pursuing that program. Also, despite the high tuitions for children in Jewish schools, Jewish educators are not highly paid nor is the status of the Jewish educator very high in the American Jewish community. The best and the brightest, therefore, choose other professions which offer much higher incomes and/or higher status.

CAJE began as a movement for change which challenged the prevailing communal structure of American Jewry, at least its educational structure. However, the very popularity of the Conference inhibits its persistence as a challenge to that communal structure. Indeed, many of the leaders of the Jewish educational establishment in the United States have endorsed the objectives and methodologies of CAJE, which has become part of, or has

20 Quoted in Seymour Rossel, "Can We Make Jewish Education Better?," *Present Tense*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Winter 1980, p. 24.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

been co-opted into, the prevailing Jewish educational structure; it is now part of the Jewish organizational structure, rather than a challenge to it.

While the objectives of CAJE are relatively limited (and its prospects for effecting change even more so), the situation is vastly different with respect to the Jewish feminist movement. The 1970s witnessed a large degree of turmoil and struggle with the issues of the roles of women in the American Jewish community and in Judaism in all of its branches. Though it may not have been part of its agenda, the American feminist movement of the 1960s spawned a specifically Jewish feminist movement some years later. In part, this may have been a consequence of the fact that many of the leading feminists, such as Betty Friedman and Gloria Steinem, are Jewish. Also, young American Jewish women have achieved a disproportionately high level of education, which made them acutely aware of feminist issues. Some of them found themselves caught between two worlds, as was evident in a statement contained in the first issue of *Brooklyn Bridge*, a self-styled "revolutionary Jewish newspaper," in February 1971:

Jewish daughters are thus caught up in a double bind: we are expected to grow up assimilating the American image of "femininity" . . . and at the same time to be the "womanly" bulwark of our people against the destruction of our culture. Now we suffer the oppression of women of both cultures and are torn by the contradictions between the two While PhDs do make Jewish parents proud of their daughters, the universities are recognized as hunting-grounds for making a "good" marriage. Grandchildren assure the race.²²

For those women whose consciousness involved an examination of their positions within religious beliefs and practices, the contradictions were particularly acute. Reform Judaism, which had by the 1940s lost its distinctive German character, had adopted the principle of sexual equality in the synagogue as far back as the nineteenth century with respect to having mixed pews and counting women for the quorum (*minyan*) necessary to conduct prayers. However, even within Reform, women's "proper" place was still regarded to be within the home. Despite official Reform ideology of sexual equality in all religious matters, it was not until 1972 that a woman, Sally Priesand, was ordained as a rabbi. Women were still not acceptable in the role of spiritual leaders. Priesand was not the first woman to study in one of the rabbinical

22 Quoted in Anne Lapidus Lerner, "Who Hast Not Made Me A Man': The Movement for Equal Rights for Women in American Jewry," *American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 77, 1977, p. 5.

seminaries of Reform Judaism; there were at least two others earlier in the century, but they were both refused ordination. Priesand's ordination at the now-merged Hebrew Union College — Jewish Institute of Religion, on June 3, 1972, was given wide publicity in the media, and the influence of the women's movement on her achievement was clearly evident. As she, herself, wrote, in 1975: "Ten years ago, women were much more opposed to the idea of a woman rabbi than were men. Since then, however, the feminist movement has made a tremendous contribution in terms of consciousness-raising, and women now demand complete and full participation in synagogue life."²³

Even in Reform there is some resistance to change, as is reflected in the remarks of one Reform rabbi who let it be known that women would not be called to the Torah in his congregation, on the grounds that "the Torah service is the last frontier of male religious functions."²⁴

The ordination of women in Reform Judaism can provide the necessary title, but it does not guarantee a job. Some women, after experiencing strong resistance, have chosen to work in areas of Jewish communal service other than the rabbinate when their attempts to secure pulpit positions ended with frustration. Apparently, social attitudes are even more difficult to change than religious practice in Reform Judaism. As Anne Lapidus Lerner observed:

Clearly, if the Reform movement, which in many cases has abrogated such basic areas of Jewish observance as *kashrut* or the use of *tallit* and *tefillin*, has changed dates of holidays, has held Sabbath services on Sunday, and has been equivocal about intermarriage, has taken so long to ordain a woman, the impediment was not religious in nature.²⁵

If the impediments to change were so strong within Reform Judaism, which is explicitly based upon an ideology of change and adaptation, it should not be surprising that the issue of women's equality in Conservative Judaism, which claims adherence to tradition, became volatile and threatened to split the movement. At the 1972 convention of the Rabbinic Assembly, the rabbinic organization of American Conservative rabbis, a delegation of women, belonging to a Jewish feminist organization, called *Ezrat Nashim*, issued a manifesto which included demands for the complete participation of women in religious activities.²⁶ This was not an impulsive action. In 1971 *Ezrat Nashim* was

23 Sally Priesand, *Judaism and the New Woman* (New York: Behrman House, 1975), p. xv.

24 Quoted in Lerner, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

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founded in New York City by a small group of well-educated Jewish women from diverse backgrounds, who came together as a study group. They perceived Jewish tradition as having been progressive in the past, but as having stagnated in recent times. Their concern derived from a deep commitment to Judaism and, simultaneously, a sense of having been utterly shortchanged in the area of religious expression as well as in the Jewish community as a whole.

The impact of the *Ezrat Nashim* manifesto was loud and clear. Groups such as the Women's League for Conservative Judaism, The United Synagogue of America, the majority of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS) of the Rabbinical Assembly — as well as the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America — all responded positively to some degree and affirmed the need to recognize “the feminist demand for increased women's rights.”²⁷ The decision of the CJLS, by a vote of 9 to 4, to count women equally with men for the *minyan* resulted in a front-page story in the *New York Times*. But, a heated debate continued over precisely which rights to accord women. The results of a 1975 questionnaire indicate that a majority of the Conservative synagogues which responded call women to the Torah and count women within the *minyan*.²⁸ The issue of the ordination of women within Conservative Judaism was even more complex than that of counting them for a *minyan*. After a difficult struggle (and, perhaps not coincidentally, only after the death of Professor Saul Lieberman, the revered Talmud scholar on the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary), the faculty of the Seminary voted 34–8, in October 1983, to admit women into their rabbinic program and to ordain them. The following year, there were several women in the program and the Rabbinic Assembly affirmed its commitment to accept duly ordained women rabbis as full members. A small minority within the Rabbinic Assembly which opposed the ordination of women has formed the Movement for Traditional Conservative Judaism. In addition to the religious-ideological and social bases for their opposition, some point to the sociological evidence in the finding of the study by Liebman and Shapiro concerning the future of Conservative Judaism.²⁹ That evidence derives from the fact that the most

27 Ibid., p. 20.

28 Ibid., p. 21.

29 Charles S. Liebman and Saul Shapiro, “A Survey of the Conservative Movement and Some of Its Religious Attitudes.” Study released at the 1979 Biennial Convention of the United Synagogue of America, Nov. 11–15, 1979. Also see Charles S. Liebman, “The Future of Conservative Judaism in the United States,” *Jerusalem Newsletter: Viewpoints*, No. 11, Center for Jewish Community Studies, March 31, 1980.

committed segment of Conservative Judaism, those whose children are most likely to continue to affiliate with the movement, is least concerned with the issue of the ordination of women. Among those who are most adamantly supportive of such ordination there is a much weaker probability that their children will affiliate with the Conservative movement; they are much more likely to affiliate with Reform or not to affiliate with any synagogue. Nevertheless, the Movement for Traditional Conservative Judaism has not as yet been able to demonstrate that it is a significant force within Conservative Judaism.

Even within American Orthodox Judaism, there have been loud calls for innovation and a reevaluation of the woman's role, both within the synagogue *per se*, and within religious life in general.³⁰ Although the issue has not been as challenging, on an institutional level, within Orthodoxy as it has been within the Conservative movement, both because there is a more firmly-based conception of sex-role differentiation and a much stronger tendency within Orthodoxy to submit to rabbinic authority, it seems reasonable to anticipate that the challenges to traditional modes will accelerate in the future. Since the levels of secular education and occupation are rising among Orthodox women, it is difficult to imagine that they will not internalize many of the prevalent American middle-class notions of women's equality, as will their male counterparts who are also increasingly acculturated in the educational and occupational structures. It seems inevitable that increasing numbers of Orthodox women and men will experience serious personal conflicts with respect to their perceptions of the position of women within Orthodoxy. Unless there are indications of sensitivity to those conflicts and a receptivity to accommodation within the boundaries of *halakhah* and practice, those women and men can be expected to challenge the prevalent Orthodox institutional arrangements.

The religious sphere is not the only area within Jewish life that Jewish feminists have challenged as sexist. They have also challenged the exclusive domination by males of virtually all of the decision-making positions within American Jewish organizations. As Daniel Elazar observed, in 1973:

With some exceptions, women function in environments segregated from male decision-makers within the Jewish community. The exceptions are significant for what they reveal. Very wealthy women who have a

30 See, for example, Saul J. Berman, "The Status of Women in Halakhic Judaism," *Tradition*, Vol. 14, No. 2, Fall 1973, pp. 5-28; Chana K. Poupko and Devora L. Wohlgelemerter, "Women's Liberation — An Orthodox Response," *Tradition*, Vol. 15, No. 4, Spring 1976, pp. 45-52; Blu Greenberg, *On Woman and Judaism: A View from Tradition* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981).

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record of activity in their own right, often in conjunction with their husbands, but sometimes even without them, are admitted to the governing councils of major Jewish institutions and organizations. So, too, are the top leaders of the women's groups, in an *ex officio* capacity which is sometimes translated into meaningful participation but frequently remains *ex officio*.³¹

In an effort to determine the extent to which this pattern had changed by the end of the 1970s, this author examined the listings of "National Jewish Organizations" in the 1979 American Jewish Year Book,³² specifically with respect to the proportion of women to men among the chief executive officers of six categories of organizations: community relations, cultural, overseas aid, religious and educational, social/mutual benefit, and social welfare. In each category, specifically women's organizations were excluded, as it was assumed that their chief executive officers would be women. (Although it was discovered that even among the women's organizations there were some whose executive directors were men.) The findings indicated that seven of the twenty-four chief executive officers of community relations organizations, or 29.1 percent, were women; five of the presidents of thirty-two cultural organizations, or 15.63 percent, were women; two of the sixteen chief executive officers of overseas aid organizations, or 12.5 percent, were women; ten of the 137 executive officers of religious and cultural organizations, or 7 percent, were women; one of the chief executive officers of sixteen social/mutual benefit organizations, or 6 percent, was a woman; and three of the twenty-five executive officers of social welfare organizations, or 12 percent, were women. Comparing those proportions with those of 1969, it was found that the only category in which there was substantial difference was in community relations organizations. In 1969 there were virtually no female chief executive officers in that category.³³

Undoubtedly, there will be those who will argue that the gross underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions within American Jewish organizations is not the result of sexism but, rather, due to the lack of professionally-trained women capable of filling these positions. Others will argue that the underrepresentation is due to the fact that women are much less career-oriented than men, and that women are much less willing than men to relocate to other communities when their careers so demand. However, these argu-

31 Daniel J. Elazar, "Women in American Jewish Life," *Congress Bi-Weekly*, Vol. 40, No. 13, Nov. 23, 1973, p. 10.

32 *American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 79, 1979, pp. 302-42.

33 *American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 70, 1969, pp. 469-90.

ments do not survive closer scrutiny. First of all, many, if not most of the men who occupy the key decision-making positions in American Jewish organizational life did not undergo specific professional training for their present positions. Rather, they came up through the ranks and gained most of their expertise on the job. Secondly, the results of a survey of women in Jewish communal service indicate that the majority of women who responded are very interested in career advancement and are willing to relocate when necessary.³⁴ The available evidence strongly supports the conclusion that the pattern of moving up the ranks into key positions is typical for males; it has been closed to women. To a large extent, this remains so even in organizations which publicly support equal rights for women, including career advancement. Given this pattern of exclusion, it may be anticipated that women who seek leadership positions will find them outside of Jewish organizational life, and that increasing numbers of Jewish women who may not, personally, aspire to high-level executive positions will, nevertheless, feel alienated from American Jewish communal life.

Of the three movements for change discussed so far, only CAJE has become institutionalized. Neither of the other two, the *Havurah* and Jewish women's movements, has become an organization. They remain social movements which have relatively wide appeal among American Jews and, to some extent, even have support among many individuals and organizations within the American Jewish "Establishment." Perhaps precisely because they have not formally organized, they have thus far avoided Michels' "iron law of oligarchy." While each challenges patterns within the established communal structure and provides for alternative modes of Jewish expression and activity, they are, by and large, viewed as legitimate subcommunal movements by the organized community, rather than as countercommunal, threatening movements. They do not challenge any of the most sacred values of the organized community, even though they may challenge specific institutional arrangements.

In contrast, there was another movement which emerged in the 1970s which, while it initially attracted many who were disturbed by what they viewed as the inflexibility and lack of creativity of American Jewish leadership with respect to the relationship between the American Jewish community and Israel, was resoundingly condemned and ostracized by the organized community. Organized after the Yom Kippur War, the movement called itself "Breira."

34 Sophie B. Engel and Jane Rogul, "Career Mobility: Perceptions and Observations (A Survey of Women in Jewish Communal Service)," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. 56, No. 1, Fall 1979, pp. 101-2.

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In so doing, it highlighted its opposition to the dominant Israeli view of *ayn breira*, that “no alternative” exists to the policies of the Israeli government with respect to its relations with the Arabs in general, and the Palestinian Arabs in particular. Founded by a group of students from the Jewish students’ movement, Breira soon became a national membership organization with a paid staff and, by 1975, a monthly newsletter, *Interchange*, appeared. It attracted many rabbis and intellectuals who favored a more conciliatory stance by Israel with respect to its Arab neighbors and the territories captured in the Six-Day War, and placed emphasis on the creative viability and autonomy of Jewish communities outside of Israel, especially in the United States, a perspective which challenged one of the core tenets of official Zionism. By 1977 the organization’s newsletter expanded to include the publication of critical articles dealing with a wide range of Jewish issues, such as the future of the United Jewish Appeal,³⁵ the racially-changing neighborhood of East Flatbush, Brooklyn,³⁶ and Argentinian Jewry.³⁷ The major focus, however, remained: an interlocking sympathy and empathy with Palestinian Arabs, a critique of Israeli policies toward the Arabs, and a critique of the American Jewish leadership’s support of those Israeli policies.

Despite its initial popularity and success in gaining wide support from among many American Jews who were dissatisfied with the leadership of the organized community, Breira was short-lived. Its demise may be attributed to external and internal forces. Externally, the more right-wing Zionist forces within the American Jewish community launched a powerful attack upon the organization and portrayed it as an enemy of Israel. For example, an organization called “Americans for a Safe Israel” published and widely distributed a pamphlet by Rael Jean Isaac, a political sociologist and Zionist Revisionist, in which she alleged that Breira supported the political program of the PLO, and that a number of the founders of Breira had direct involvements with the PLO and anti-Zionist activities.³⁸ Much of the English-language Jewish press in the United States, especially one of the most widely-read American Jewish weeklies, *The Jewish Week*, published many of the same allegations. Given the priority of Israel’s security in the American Jew-

35 Milton Goldin, “The UJA: Losing Its Appeal?,” *Interchange*, Vol. 2, No. 8, April 1977, pp. 1ff.

36 Elizabeth Koltun and Neil Schechter, “Whatever Happened to East Flatbush?,” *Interchange*, Vol. 2, No. 7, March 1977, pp. 1ff.

37 Eugene F. Sofer, “Argentinian Jewry: What Do We Need to Know?,” *Interchange*, Vol. 3, No. 1, September 1977, pp. 1ff.

38 Rael Jean Isaac, *Breira: Counsel for Judaism* (New York: Americans for a Safe Israel, 1977).

ish value system and the tendency to accept uncritically official Israeli government positions, it is not surprising that many of the initial Breira sympathizers quickly retracted their support of the organization.

Nor did many of the activities of Breira itself provide the assurance needed that it was, first and foremost, a Jewish organization dedicated to the well-being of Jews and Jewish communities both in Israel and throughout the world. As one of the founders of the organization was to subsequently observe, Breira frequently functioned in ways which left open the degree of its *ahavat yisrael*, basic love of Israel, land and people. As Alan Mintz put it: "The confident single-mindedness of the statements issued in the aftermath of the October War, . . . seemed oblivious to the enormity of the trauma in human and spiritual terms."³⁹ Likewise: "The placards and statements distributed by Breira at the time of Arafat's speech at the UN, which read essentially 'Palestinians — Yes, Arafat — No,' were an example of a decent political sentiment vitiated by a miserable sense of timing."⁴⁰ Also, the credibility of the organization was suspect because it had "gone to lengths to court intellectuals who have hitherto had no connection with other Jewish causes."⁴¹ The organized campaign by the Zionist right to discredit Breira and its own political ineptness was sufficient to bring about the disintegration of the organization. It would, however, be incorrect to assume that private dissent from establishment positions has disappeared among American Jews. On the contrary, it is as alive as ever, and seems to be reappearing in a number of recent efforts to build an organized movement for change. For example, many of those who were affiliated with Breira are now affiliated with what some view as its reincarnation, a more recently-founded organization called New Jewish Agenda, which is dedicated to most of the very same objectives as Breira, but which has a much more explicitly positive Jewish stance, even as it is critical of communal leadership and policies. The extent to which it can manage to avoid the fate of Breira remains to be seen. Or, to cite an even more recent example, the organization spearheaded by a small group of Jewish intellectuals who have records of extensive involvement in American Jewish organizational life, Israel-oriented affairs, and worldwide Jewish causes, which was formed following the Israeli operation in Lebanon during the summer of 1982. This organization was formed in protest at Israeli government policies, and seeks to provide an alternative to official avenues for American

39 Alan Mintz, "The People's Choice?: A Demurral on Breira," *Response*, No. 32, Winter 1976/7, p. 8.

40 *Ibid.*

41 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

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Jewish philanthropic funds raised on behalf of Israel, so that the Israeli government may not put those funds to use in carrying out policies opposed by many American Jews. The extent to which this new organization will succeed, thereby, in changing Israeli government policies is highly doubtful, especially in the short range, given the differences in the nature of the relationship between Israel and American Jewry.⁴² On the other hand, because of the apparent strong stream of disagreement with Israeli policy within the American Jewish community, the prospects for this organization's success in changing the patterns of philanthropy within that community may be significantly stronger.

To return to one of the first issues raised in this article, namely, the democracy of the organized American Jewish community, it may be concluded that the answer is not a simple one. It is a democracy in that most of the organizational leadership is elected by the membership of the individual organizations or their representatives. The positions of the leadership probably represent those of the mainstream in the community, though not always, of course, uniformly so. However, there is a significant segment of the American Jewish population, consisting of many who are organizationally affiliated, and many more who are not, which is critical of the community leadership and structure and feels relatively impotent to effect meaningful change. Nor does the communal leadership feel the need to reach out to the elements of American Jewry, to bring them within the communal structure in a meaningful way, and to engage in critical analysis of established norms and possible need for change. It is this exclusive character of the communal structure and its leadership which poses the greatest challenge to the future of the organized American Jewish community.

42 Cf., Charles S. Liebman, "Moral and Symbolic Elements in the Politics of Israel-Diaspora Relations," in Daniel J. Elazar (ed.), *Kinship and Consent*, op. cit., pp. 345-54.