



The Return of the Jewish Cosmopolitan

By Michael Gottsegen

An event I attended recently organized by HIAS -- the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society -- helped to crystallize for me the nature of a choice faced today by the Jewish community in America. HIAS, like many other social service organizations in the American Jewish community, finds itself in an odd position. Its prime mission has been largely fulfilled. Times are pretty good for Jews the world over, at least as compared with the situation in the past, and there are not so many Jews clamoring to be resettled in America. So what is HIAS to do? Should it cut back its operations commensurately or should it radically redefine its mission to include the resettlement of non-Jewish refugees? For while the number of Jewish refugees has dwindled, the number of non-Jewish refugees coming to America, and in need of assistance, has skyrocketed.

In the face of this demographic shift, HIAS finds itself contemplating a major reorientation. The slogan emblazoned upon a large glossy poster announcing the HIAS conference underscored the nature of the shift in organizational mission and identity that is being contemplated. "It's a mitzvah to help a refugee," it read. Not "it's a mitzvah to help a Jewish refugee," but "it's a mitzvah to help any refugee."

Whether HIAS finally decides to broaden its mission in this manner is less important for this article's purposes than the broader significance of the situation that brought HIAS to this juncture. For the Jewish community -- and many of its mainstream organizations more particularly -- finds itself at a crossroads like that at which HIAS stands. The big problems that galvanized the community's heavy lifting for over fifty years -- fighting anti-Semitism, settling refugees, creating a safe and prosperous Israel -- are largely solved.

Consequently, many of the institutions created to address these problems now find themselves in a position not unlike that of the American military after the Cold War. A large and complex institution that was well suited to the world in which it took shape all of a sudden finds itself in an entirely different world, unsure of its new purpose and suitability. And like the U.S. military after the Cold War, our leading institutions are struggling to understand the new world in which they find themselves and to define their new mission in terms that are appropriate to this new world.

But this is not only a challenge for the organizations and institutions that now need to reinvent themselves. It is also a challenge for the Jewish community

collectively and for each of us individually to the degree that our own Jewish identities are bound up with the same concerns and deeply felt moral imperatives that have driven the community's major institutions. The question of what is to be done with the peace and with the "peace dividend" is a question that confronts not only the community's central institutions, but also the community as a whole and its members.

The challenge is real, but so too are the opportunities. Defining the still ambiguous nature of the peace and its meaning will be hard, but the rewards for doing so will be great. Managing the shift of resources from "guns" to "butter" will not be easy, but redirecting resources towards needs either freshly emergent or long unmet can serve to insure the community's future health.

Further complicating this process is the not unrelated governance debate over whether the centralized system that was necessary when the most pressing needs were national or international in scale is required in "peacetime." Again, the contours of the ongoing debate in the Jewish community can be likened to the debate that is going on in American society at large. For reasons not dissimilar to those that have led in recent years to a call to devolve "taxing and spending" power and revenues back to the states and localities, the same kind of arguments are now being made in the Jewish communal context.

There is more at stake here, however, than the perennial question of guns or butter. There is more at stake than who pays and who plays, than who cuts and who chooses. There is more at stake, in other words, than turf, and this "more" is at stake even in the turf fights. The "more" that is at stake here is the meaning -- or more precisely, the meanings -- of being Jewish in the 21st century. This is the question that, truth be told, we are all struggling to answer: What will it mean to be Jewish in the 21st century? We know it will mean many things, and even disparate and contradictory things. But in light of the truly historical changes discussed above, it is a fair bet that the diverse medley of ways of feeling, thinking and doing Jewish that come to predominate in the next fifty years will differ profoundly from the modes with which we are presently familiar.

I come back to HIAS. HIAS is now working to define a way (or one of the ways) of being Jewish and expressing Jewishness that will make deep and intuitive sense to many Jews in the new world of the 21st century. It is searching for an idiom that combines rich Jewish particularity and an equally authentic Jewish commitment to meeting the needs of the wider human community. The HIAS slogan quoted above exemplifies this new idiom.

This rhetorical strategy -- and the deeper intuition that it reflects -- seems likely to attract the interest and enthusiastic participation of younger and more cosmopolitan Jews. Such Jews -- and the great majority of American Jews under fifty surely belong to their ranks -- experience no contradiction between their Jewishness and their Americanness, or between their Americanness and their

sense of being global citizens. What the rhetorical shift evinced by the HIAS slogan indicates is that HIAS intends to open its ranks to Jews of the cosmopolitan variety who intuitively feel themselves to be Jewish citizens of the world and are looking for a place where these feelings can be shared, deepened and translated into new forms of sacred practice. And such Jews will likely respond positively to the kind of appeal that HIAS is framing.

HIAS is intended to figure here only as an example of an organization that is seeking to redefine its mission, identity and appeal in this transitional moment. There are many similarly situated organizations that could surely benefit from redefining themselves and their mission in an analogous manner. Such re-framing would be not only in their own organizational interest, but by creating new avenues and vehicles for the expression of a widely shared but still inchoate cosmopolitan Jewishness, such re-framing would also meet a wider and as yet largely unmet communal need.

There are, of course, other Jewish organizations which do not need to reinvent themselves in order to appeal to the cosmopolitan sensibility of the cosmopolitan majority. The American Jewish World Service, The Jewish Fund for Justice, Mazon, Shomrei Adamah and several other organizations share a common profile in this respect. Each is a Jewish organization that exists in order to address a problem that extends beyond -- and often far beyond -- the confines of the Jewish community. Each appeals to those who feel themselves to be at once Jewish and citizens of the wider human community, to those who want to act as Jews to address the problems of the larger world.

But these organizations are better poised to meet the needs of Jewish cosmopolitans in only one respect. The challenge that these Jewish organizations have yet to meet lies at the other pole, in developing and deepening the specifically Jewish aspects of the experience that they offer to those who are drawn to their global mission. In fact, most of these organizations are now busily working to develop just this dimension of their organizational identities. As this work goes forward, these organizations will become more effective vehicles of self-expression for a potential constituency which wants both the universal and the particular and has no interest in organizations that pay only lip service to either.

It is an exciting time. It is a protean moment. Something new is being created in Jewish life and none of us can know how things are going to look twenty years from now. The Jew as cosmopolitan is back, but with a difference. The cosmopolitan of yesteryear, experiencing a tension between general solidarity and in-group loyalty, all too readily sacrificed his or her particularity for membership in humanity. But the Jewish global citizen of today is not willing to sacrifice either aspect for the sake of the other. She seeks a form of Jewish life that integrates the two in a rich and meaningful manner.

Organizations, institutions and communities that find a way - and there are assuredly many ways -- to express this complex wholeness are poised to prosper in the new era we are entering. The challenge is real, and since the challenge is new the field is still wide open. No single organization owns this vast market and no single organization ever will. But the community will be the more vibrant, and the forms of Jewishness more vital and more varied, as organizations begin to compete for the affection and affiliation of this important constituency.

