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THE CASE FOR CONFLICT IN COMMUNAL LIFE

As members of groups ranging from JDL to Breira are well aware, one of the central tenets of faith of Jewish communal life is that American Jewry almost always adopts policy through achieving consensus. Public dissent and open conflict are studiously avoided. This principle operates at all levels of decision-making affecting lowly synagogue bodies as well as the more prestigious metropolitan federation distribution committees. Not only is consensus the norm for intra-organizational affairs, it also operates on the macro level impelling the variety of major American Jewish organizations to adopt quite similar positions on most, though not all, major Jewish policy issues of the day: Israel, Soviet Jewry, intergroup relations, etc.

The consensual procedure has, of course, many advantages for Jewish communal life. Those of a more Machiavellian bent suggest that the consensual rule is merely the way top decision-makers and the plutocrats of American Jewry obtain legitimation of their decisions. Still, even if one rejects this interpretation, the consensual procedure does entail a number of salutary benefits for organized Jewry. First, and most obviously, working to achieve consensus minimizes the risk of alienating individuals holding minority views. Second, as a corollary, the likelihood of fractionalization and dissolution of communal institutions is also minimized. Third, the consensual model has implications for leadership recruitment and advancement. Since advancement is contingent upon one's proven ability to work within a consensual framework, the rule of consensus assures the relative compliance of up-and-coming leaders, the shaping of their lower level decisions to fit within broader institutional needs, and the smooth, well-ordered replacement of old leaders with new leaders of similar values, interests, and social backgrounds. Finally,

the consensus rule impels the Jewish community to adopt a united front in its dealings with non-Jews. This result is, perhaps, the principal reason for the very existence of the consensual rule.

But, alongside the advantages of the consensus model are a number of drawbacks inherent in the procedure:

First, the consensual model tends to produce bland, inoffensive policy, policy often legitimated on the basis of precedent and tradition. Since the vociferous objections of even one influential member of a policy-making committee must be met under the consensus model, elements of policy the least bit objectionable are often eliminated in the decision-making process. As a result, unusual circumstances — frequently external to the institution — are required to make for policy change. Unusual circumstances include pressure from a more influential body such as a funding agency or Israel or a spurt of publicity such as that surrounding the discovery of the Jewish poor; unusual circumstances may also include the lobbying activities of a well-organized and focused pressure group or those of a single influential individual.

Second, since policy need be bland and inoffensive, the consensual model inhibits the inclusion and cooptation of individuals or groups who insist on being controversial and offensive. Pressure groups which do not participate in the American-Jewish consensus — and here we can add the North American Jewish Students Network and the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews to JDL and Breira — must arise outside the preexisting organizations, there being few mechanisms for those with deviant views to express themselves within most preexisting structures. The formation of ideological factions and the election of representatives of those factions to ruling bodies characteristic of Western political parties are an infrequent occurrence in most Jewish organizations which eschew the bona fide electoral process.

Third, since a premium is placed on consensus, since policy must be inoffensive, and since deviant groups cannot emerge within the ongoing organizations, the types of individuals selected to “lead” communal organizations are often ill-equipped to arouse much broad-based public support for charting new directions even if they so desired. Administrative skills in professionals are preferred to imagination. Team playing and facility at compromise — the basis of

committee work — are valued inordinately in comparison with inspirational skills (there are exceptions though, in the case of an organization intent on and able to recruit new members — the New York Young Leadership Cabinet of UJA is such an example). Moreover, the consensual model implies what is called “sponsored mobility” instead of “contest mobility.” The former type of mobility means that leaders on lower rungs achieve notoriety by leaders higher up and are then asked to join the next higher rung of leadership. Contest mobility means that leaders compete for popular favor of those lower down on the hierarchy and those achieving such favor are elevated to higher leadership in some manner.

A fourth consequence of the consensual model is that leadership is often retained in a small, like-minded ruling clique of people with similar (usual upper middle class) social backgrounds. Since leadership is passed on by previous leaders to subsequent leaders, leadership tends to replicate itself in ideology and style. Thus, the possibility of radically different leadership emerging in a populist process is severely diminished.

Fifth, since the consensus model’s leadership recruitment process places so little value on popular support, communal institutions have relatively little investment in educating their constituencies except as a matter of altruism. Where there is conflict, and that conflict may be resolved in part through appeals to public opinion, it is to the advantage of parties to the conflict to inform the public as to the virtues of their positions. Here, educating the public is a matter of self-interest for all sides rather than altruism.

A sixth consequence of the consensual model is that politically effective participation in the affairs of the Jewish community is restricted to the few with the money and, more significantly, the time to devote to large amounts of genuinely unrewarding ancillary work. By ancillary work I mean the organizational supportive tasks necessary to keep any institution operating rather than the primary work for which the institution exists such as praying to God or defending Jewish rights.

Finally, as a consequence of all the above, the typical individual’s allegiance and dedication to the Jewish community are probably much less intense than in times of healthy factionalization. This seemingly paradoxical statement requires a little explaining. I

take as a premise that the attachment of people to a larger cause or society is dependent on their being attached to smaller social units within that society. As an example, studies of military morale show that the most effective armies consist of soldiers deeply attached to their particular squad (Israel's Defense Forces are a case in point). Similarly, attachment to the Jewish People has historically been expressed in attachments to specific, well-developed movements or ideologies (e.g., Zionism, traditional Judaism, Chassidism, Bundism). Nowadays, in part as a result of the consensus model, Jewish movements and ideologies and the institutions that embody them are hardly differentiable and therefore hardly worthy of strong individual allegiance except on the part of those who invest much of their energies in the particular organization.

In short, the consensual model results in a variety of bad side effects. Among them are uninspired and undifferentiated policy and leadership, inability to incorporate dissident groups, an ill-informed Jewish public, concentration of influence in the hands of a self-perpetuating clique of well-off individuals with adequate spare time, and the failure to excite the inspired allegiance of large numbers of Jews to Judaism through devotion to one of many ideological streams.

Ways to Reform

This situation can be remedied by individuals now entering young leadership ranks of organized Jewry, individuals whose political consciousness was partially shaped by the era of participatory democracy.

The basic underlying principle of such reform is that restrained conflict is always healthy and that even unrestrained conflict (resulting in rupture) may sometimes be healthy.

This principle has a number of concrete implications and applications.

The first application concerns the way meetings and committee work are now conducted. Typically, decisions are arrived at by obtaining the support of everyone with possibly one or two dissidents. Even these dissidents are strongly pressured to formally withdraw their objections once a decision begins to emerge. Sometimes (all too often), the chair enters the room with the committee's decision already formulated and is seeking legitimation

for its views. This process can be replaced with one that demands only majority support for a proposal for it to seem legitimate. In other words, once majority support for a particular position is obtained, that position's proponents should cease making substantive changes in the proposal so as to obtain near unanimous support. Moreover, proponents of the minority position should demand, on occasion, that their views be communicated to higher bodies.

A second application concerns the methods of recruitment and selection of leaders. Currently, leaders are recruited by nominating committees for vacancies as they emerge, and "elections" by broader bodies are held to legitimate the decisions of the nominating committees. The process thus avoids conflicts and the attendant discussion of issues and personalities of candidates. One way to reform this farcical electoral procedure is to recruit two candidates for every position or simply to refrain from appointing a nominating committee altogether and require candidates to campaign and be nominated by petitions with numbers appropriate to the vacant office.

A third reform concerns the role of advocates, critics, and muckrakers. One of the tools of achieving consensus is the classification and restriction of allegedly sensitive information. Usually, anything involving money is considered sensitive. Moreover, there is usually no provision or encouragement for outsiders to observe committee meetings. Finally, many of the people who are in a position to investigate and criticize the organized community are paid by that community (Jewish journalists and communal workers are examples). In short, none but the extremely dedicated and talented can obtain access to information needed to intelligently criticize the functioning of a communal institution and to be heard by that institution.

Yet another technique designed to effect input of conflicting views into the decision-making process is the holding of open hearings by communal agencies. Hearings form a critical element in the American legislative process yet are virtually absent among Jewish (and all other) public service agencies. Yet open hearings would serve to arouse grass roots interest in Jewish communal affairs and give normally excluded constituencies the sense, if not the reality of participation. Of course, open hearings run counter to the

very essence of the consensual rule by publicly airing differences among Jews.

Finally, greater participation and democracy — my reasons for suggesting we break the consensual rule — can also be furthered by creating electoral cells or havurot. Each havurah — of perhaps ten families — would cast a single vote in the major decisions taken by the organization of which it would form a constituent unit. An organization so structured would by its very nature demand informed participation by its members and give them the opportunity to discuss its policies with like-minded co-members (for a discussion of a related idea, see Norbert Samuelson, "How the American Jewish Community Could Be Democratic: A Political Model," *Interchange*, 1, 8, April, 1976).

Concluding Note

The institution of Tzedakah Collectives illustrate several points raised above. Specifically, they are another example of dissident Jewish organizations arising outside the pre-existing structure and, more significantly, they demonstrate a model of performing a key Jewish activity — giving tzedakah — that incorporates principles of democracy, egalitarianism and conflict. The following brief description of the phenomenon was previewed in *Interchange*, 1, 10, June, 1976:

Over the last year, at least five "tzedakah collectives" have appeared in metropolitan areas, including Washington D.C., Boston, and New York. These groups have about a dozen members each, who pool their charitable contributions to support a wide variety of causes. The group as a whole decides how their money shall be allocated. This movement in Jewish philanthropy parallels the rise of the havurot both in motivation and form; and, like the havurot, the tzedakah collectives may have an increasing influence in the conventional sectors of American Jewry.

The critical structural differences between the more established philanthropic organizations and the tzedakah collectives are on matters of control, autonomy, and participation. Basically, tzedakah collective members object to having their funds filtered through several layers of bureaucracy before reaching their ultimate destination as is the case when giving to the federations or the UJA. As an alternative, tzedakah collective members choose to participate

directly in deciding what causes to support and the amounts to be distributed. They thus achieve a feeling of directly reaching out and helping Jews who are in need of their support.

The objections to conventional federation structures reflect not only political and organizational differences, but also the variations in social class and Jewish background between tzedakah members and those active in metropolitan federation campaigns. In general, collectives consist of middle-class professionals such as academics, lower-level Jewish communal professionals, rabbis, educators, editors, and writers. Federation activists on the other hand, are mostly lawyers and doctors, or in business and finance; they are rarely engaged in the "knowledge" industries (i.e. the production, transmission, and distribution of cultural and intellectual substance.) These occupational distinctions are indicators of significant differences in style of dress and speech, leisure patterns and residence. Thus the collectives and the federations each provide the ambience in which their own members feel most comfortable, fulfilling a social need for their own group.

Social homogeneity arises not only from social class, but also concerns the political and personal goals of the majority of tzedakah collectives' members. Some of the cardinal objectives of the socio-political movements of the late sixties, to challenge traditional hierarchies, authority, and prestige, and to insist upon egalitarian methods of decision-making, have come to be incorporated into the tzedakah collectives through individuals who grew out of that era. Thus the collectives are generally small in size and loosely structured, with no paid employees, no formal positions of leadership, and apparently few informal leaders. Each group has established some rules guaranteeing egalitarian decision-making: one person/one vote, or in one case, the number of votes accorded to each member is equivalent to the number of weeks' salary he or she is donating to the group's central fund.

In contrast to the fund-raising or budgetary work of most agencies, tzedakah collectives involve their members very directly in the expression and exchange of Jewish values. Individuals seek out and research small projects in need of funds. They spend their time at meetings discussing how those projects suit personal or group Jewish values, and also in considering the impact the collective's

small funds will have (ranging from \$2,000 to \$5,000 annually per collective), both upon the particular group in question, as well as on the Jewish community at large. This work and these discussions draw upon and actualize the members' Jewish values, while the small size of the projects diminishes the amount of less interesting (but necessary) back-up activity attendant to federation work.

Finally, and perhaps most fundamentally, tzedakah collectives provide funds for projects often too small, too controversial, or too informal to merit the proper attention of the more traditional Jewish communal funding operations. The collectives have awarded funds to dissident (generally dovish) political groups in Israel as well as to social change projects concerned with such issues as women's rights, the consumer movement, Arab-Jewish rapprochement, and the condition of Sephardic Jewry. In America, funds have been going to activities which are generally under-funded by the wider community: the North American Jewish Student Appeal and its constituents; Project Ezra; etc.

As for the ultimate role that the tzedakah collectives play or might fulfill in the wider American Jewish community, there are generally two views on the subject. Some federation and UJA leaders view the collectives as a threat to the established Jewish philanthropic channels, while others pay them little attention; both views are right. The collectives counterbalance the aggregate financial might of federations and provide an alternative charity-distributing vehicle for the allegedly more enlightened and progressive individuals in the Jewish community. However, because the collectives require high levels of informed participation, are supported by workers in the "knowledge industry," are loosely structured and demand the exercise of articulated Jewish values, they probably will remain small both in size and number. Moreover, those who do join either were not giving to federations or the UJA initially, or if they were, are supplementing their former gifts with additional giving through the collectives. The collectives are unlikely to dramatically alter the existing structures, policies, and popular components of the Jewish federations. But in supporting innovation both in Israel and America the tzedakah collectives do play a unique role, and fulfill a vital function for a segment of the Jewish community that previously had lacked such an outlet.