WHAT MAKES A JEWISH ORGANIZATION "JEWISH"

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This article addresses the issue of how the "Jewishness" of Jewish communal social service institutions such as hospitals and senior citizen centers can be gauged in a time of social and cultural transition for the North American Jewish community. In previous generations, such organizations were served and staffed almost exclusively by Jews. However, today such institutions frequently serve significant numbers of gentiles. This article argues that such service is in accord with the highest standards of Jewish religious tradition and represents the fulfillment of the Jewish obligation to engage in the act of Kiddush Hashem, *the sanctification of the Divine Name in the world.*

In 1866, a conference of ultra-Orthodox rabbis was held in Mihalowitz, Hungary, at a time of great transition for a Hungarian Jewish community that was traversing the passage from a relatively closed medievalism to a much more open modernity. These rabbis were alarmed by this passage, and their conference was designed to instruct Hungarian Jews to resist particular reforms that liberalizing elements in Hungarian Jewry had introduced in response to changed social and cultural conditions. The rabbis adopted nine measures to achieve this aim. One forbade entry into a synagogue where, even though men and women sat separately, it was possible for men to see women during prayer. Another stated that a wedding in accord with longstanding Ashkenazic custom could only take place outdoors, not inside the synagogue, whereas yet another stated it was not permitted for a Jew to attend services if a rabbi delivered a sermon in the vernacular. One resolution asserted that it was forbidden to erect a synagogue with a tower. As this architectural trait traditionally marked a church, the rabbis of the Mihalowitz Conference claimed that construction of such a tower constituted an indefensible "imitation of gentile practices," and they instructed all Hungarian congregations to resist this aesthetic innovation.

Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer, who was destined to become the founder and head of the Orthodox Berlin Rabbinical Seminary in 1874, then was serving as rabbi of Eisenstadt, Hungary. Hildesheimer was a modern Orthodox Jew, and he held a Ph.D. from the prestigious University of Halle, as well as rabbinical ordination from the preeminent talmudist in Germany during the first half of the nineteenth century, Rabbi Jacob Ettlinger. Hildesheimer disagreed with virtually all the positions that his ultra-Orthodox colleagues put forth, and he responded to all the resolutions they enacted in an article disseminated to the entire Jewish community. In discussing the specific issue of whether it was permissible for a tower to be constructed on a synagogue building, Hildesheimer agreed that, although it was desirable that a tower not be erected on a synagogue for fear that it might appear to be a church, he added, "Architecture does not make a synagogue what it is, but the *genuine Jewish spirit that resides in those who attend it*" (Ellenson, 1990).

The sentiment Rabbi Hildesheimer expressed on this issue has a great deal to teach us as we ponder the question of what makes today's North American Jewish organiza-

tions, such as hospitals, homes for the elderly, and Jewish Community Centers, "Jewish." For the North American Jewish community has undergone profound transformations in the last decades akin to the passages that marked the world of central European Jewry in the last half of the 1800s, and our communal responses to these changes have been no less dramatic than those of our European Jewish ancestors. A brief description of these changes will help provide a backdrop for a consideration of the central question of this article.

When our immigrant ancestors entered the United States in the 1800s and throughout the first part of the twentieth century, they were required to adapt to a nation where Jewish organizational life was still in a relatively nascent state and where the marks of social and cultural discrimination against Jews were real. Quotas limited the number of Jews who could enter elite law and medical schools, and Jewish numbers were regulated in these professions as well. Corporations and banks routinely refused Jews entry into the highest levels of management. The Jewish community was compelled to respond to this situation by erecting Jewish hospitals and old-age homes, as well as other institutions, so that Jews could obtain needed access to employment and to services.

Today the situation has changed radically. Although large numbers of Israeli, Russian, Iranian, and South African Jewish immigrants have come to the United States in recent years, they now enter—unlike earlier generations of immigrant Jews—into an American Jewish community that is largely composed of fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-generation American Jews. Our Jewish institutions today are well organized and fully established, and the type of social and cultural discrimination that routinely confronted many of our American Jewish ancestors and that led to the creation of the specifically Jewish institutions mentioned above is largely a relic of the past. American Jews now are fully integrated members of the larger American society as the barriers that once existed have fallen.

At the same time, non-Jews interact with Jews to a degree that was unthinkable a century ago, and they happily lay claim to the resources and services our institutions provide. The nature and demographics of our situation are thus different from those of our ancestors. In some quarters, this is seen as problematic, as an illegitimate watering-down of the Jewishness of our social service organizations. There are those who protest the legitimacy of such trends in our Jewish institutions, and they question whether our social service institutions should serve a non-Jewish clientele.

In contrast, this article argues that the values that inform our Jewish institutions such as hospitals and social service centers and direct them to serve and assist large non-Jewish clienteles are faithful to the genuine Jewish spirit that resides at the heart of Judaism. Our organizations today are no less infused with Jewish meaning nor are they rendered any less Jewish than were those during the years when they served and were serviced almost exclusively by Jews. A brief survey of the teachings that Judaism provides on this topic supports these claims.

At the very outset, it is instructive to note that within Judaism there have always been universalistic and particularistic dimensions, and this dual approach to the world, as well as the relationship of God both to the Jewish people and all humankind, finds expression in the concept of covenant (*brit*) that lies at the very heart of the Bible and Jewish religious tradition. This notion maintains that God stands in active relationship with all people. To be sure, the Bible tells of the unique covenant God made with Abraham and the Jewish people in Genesis 15. There the Torah states that God established what is called "*brit bein ha-betarim*—the covenant between the pieces" with Abraham and his descendants. This covenant was carried forth over the generations and confirmed by the Jewish people as a whole at Sinai as described in Exodus 19 and 20. This is a par-

ticularistic covenant and affirms the special relationship that Judaism claims exists between God and the people Israel.

However, in Genesis 9 the concept of covenant appears in relation to Noah and his progeny. There the Torah states that, after the famous Flood that was said to have destroyed virtually all of humanity, God established a covenant with Noah and his descendants and designated the rainbow as the sign of that eternal *brit*. Noah, of course, was not Jewish. The rabbis of the Talmud in Tractate Sanhedrin emphasized that God established a covenant universal in scope with all humanity through Noah, even before a covenant was instituted with Abraham and the people Israel. Jewish religious tradition therefore asserts that all humanity, not just Jews, stand in relationship to God. The notion of a dual covenant—a covenant between God and all humankind on the one hand, and a covenant between God and the Jewish people on the other—serves as a cardinal foundation for Jewish religious beliefs and values.

At the same time, our tradition rests on another pillar as well. For just as all human beings and Jews stand in relationship to God through covenant, so all human beings and Jews are expected to imitate God and emulate the divine attributes of justice (*tzedek*) and mercy (*hesed*). This concept of *imitatio dei* calls upon Jews and gentiles alike to be partners with God in *tikkun olam* and demands that Jews and non-Jews alike share responsibility with God for the achievement of morality in the world. The Talmud, in Sotah 14a, captures this concept beautifully in the following passage:

> "Follow the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 13:5). What does this mean? Is it possible for a mortal to follow God's Presence? The verse means to teach us that we should follow the attributes of the Holy One, praised be He. As God clothes the naked, you should clothe the naked. The Bible teaches that the Holy One visited the sick; you should thus visit the sick. The Holy One comforted those who mourn; you should also comfort those who mourn. The Holy One buried the dead; you should therefore bury the dead.
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> Rabbi Simlai taught: The Torah begins with deeds of lovingkindness and ends with deeds of lovingkindness. It begins with deeds of lovingkindness, as it is written, "And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin and clothed them" (Genesis 3:21). It ends with deeds of lovingkindness, as it is written, "And God buried him [Moses] in the land of Moab" (Deuteronomy 34:6).

God and humanity, as well as the Jewish people, meet on the common ground of moral responsibility, and acts of justice and mercy bind us to God. They constitute a norm that God demands be realized in the arena of life.

The implications that these twin teachings of covenant and *imitatio dei* have for our topic are profound. In the first instance, Jewish tradition does instruct Jews to grant precedence to the Jewish community as Jews seek to concretize the values of *hesed* and *tzedek*. After all, resources and capacity are not unlimited, and there must be a way to determine comparative need in the assigning of finite funds and scarce personnel. The Talmud in Baba Metzia 71a therefore teaches, "A member of one's household takes precedence over everyone else. The poor of one's household take precedence over the poor of one's city. And the poor of one's own city take precedence over the poor of other cities." A Jew is obligated first and foremost to assume responsibility for his or her household, and a Jewish community is required to do the same for its own members when it cares for persons in a time of need. This talmudic passage reflects the ethical concern Judaism has for the family and for the Jewish people, and it bespeaks the importance our tradition assigns to the Jewish covenantal community in the Jewish hierarchy of values. As Hillel phrased it in the oft-quoted passage from *Pirkei Avot*, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?"

At the same time, Hillel quickly went on to say, "But if I am only for myself alone,

what am I?" The universalism inherent in Jewish teachings on covenant balances the particularism present in the teachings cited in the preceding paragraph and leads Jews to apply the foundational Jewish values of justice and mercy to all humanity. Thus, in *Hilchot Melachim* (Laws of Kings) 10:12, Maimonides writes, "One ought to treat the resident stranger (non-Jew) with *derekh eretz* (civility and humanity) and *hesed* (mercy and kindness) just as one does a Jew, for we are commanded to support them." Jews are commanded to recognize that all persons are created in the divine image, and they must treat all people with respect and care. Maimonides therefore continues in this section of *Hilchot Melachim* by stating that Jews are required to "bury their dead along with the dead of Israel, and support their poor among the poor of Israel." The great medieval sage then justifies this position by citing a passage from Psalms 145:9, which states, "God is good to all and His mercy is on all His works." Our social obligations as Jews extend to all humanity, and these obligations ought to be reflected appropriately in our communal social organizations and institutions.

For Jews to behave with kindness and justice toward gentiles constitutes an act of what Jewish tradition labels *Kiddush Hashem*, the sanctification of the divine name in the universe. As Abraham Joshua Heschel (1996, p. 292) has written, "The ultimate standards of living, according to Jewish teaching, are *Kiddush Hashem* and *Hillul Hashem*. The one means that everything within one's power should be done to glorify the Name of God before the world, the other that everything should be avoided to reflect dishonor upon the religion and thereby desecrate the Name of God." It is therefore no wonder that the Jerusalem Talmud, in Baba Metzia 4:5, further underscores these obligations and explicitly links acts of righteousness and kindness by Jews toward gentiles with the concept of *Kiddush Hashem*. God is made holy through the deeds of the people Israel as our community displays a concern for all those in need. As the late Chief Sepharidc Rabbi of Tel Aviv, Rabbi Hayyim David Halevi, phrased it in his *Aseh l'kha rav* 7:70-71, "The Jewish people possesses an obligation to conduct itself towards those who are strangers in its midst with integrity and fairness. In so doing, we will sanctify the Name of Heaven and the name of Israel in the world."

Rav Kook, the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel and one of the great spiritual mentors of our time, sums up the position put forth in this article when he wrote, in his *Orot Hakodesh*, "The love for Israel (*ahavat Yisrael*) entails a love for all humankind (*kol ha'adam*)." Our communal organizations must display concern for Jews and gentiles alike. Such conduct accords with the highest elements in our tradition, and our social service communal institutions —when they succeed in extending this care to their non-Jewish as well as Jewish clientele—sanctify the name of God in the world. In so doing, they reflect the ongoing vitality of the genuine Jewish spirit that Rabbi Hildesheimer described almost 150 years ago, a spirit that is rightfully reflected in our institutions in an open and tolerant North American world. By allowing this spirit to animate our organizations, the Jewish people succeed, to cite Rav Kook's words in *Orot Hakodesh* once again, in expanding the Jewish "soul" and the Jewish "song beyond the limits of Israel." In this way, our people "sing the song of humanity" that Judaism requires.

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