

AMERICAN JEWRY'S FOCUS ON CONTINUITY — AT TEN YEARS

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The American Jewish community has demonstrated its commitment to the long-term goal of strengthening Jewish identity. One of the key challenges today is how to continue to deepen personal Jewish identity while strengthening our collective identity. Concern for the renewal of Jewish life must go hand in hand with a commitment to rebuild a sense of Jewish peoplehood.

In 1991, the headlines of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) began to surface with their focus on the meteoric increase in the rate of intermarriage. While there had been widening attention to the broad issues of intensifying Jewish Education since the late 1970s, American Jews dramatically responded to the NJPS by increasingly focusing on the issue of Jewish Continuity. Rabbis, educators, lay and professional leaders, federations, and virtually every organization have sponsored symposia, conferences, and publications that have both sought to understand the challenges facing the American Jewish community and develop recommendations for how to respond (see, for example, Eisen, 1995; Fishman & Goldstein, 1993; Sarna, 1994; Shrage, 1995; and Woocher, 1995). Numerous North American communities have created commissions to mobilize attention and resources. This activity has been mirrored at the national level with task forces and broad-based commissions.

It has been almost ten years since NJPS was conducted. This ten-year anniversary provides an apt opportunity to step back and survey what has taken place and to identify emerging findings and challenges as we move forward.

We begin with the perspective that North American Jewry is on the precipice of a new era: an audacious experiment to test whether

North American Jews, now living in the most accepting and generous society in Jewish history, can create dynamic and inspired communities. Dr. Mordecai Kaplan's ideal of "living in two civilizations" may have been far easier when we were protected by the ethnic and religious divisions that segmented the fabric of American culture into a discrete series of "kept communities" excluded from full participation in American society. With the borders now virtually removed between the Jewish and non-Jewish community, American Jews, on the eve of the twenty-first century, confront the full challenge of modernity (Ruskay, 1995).

One response will be what some refer to as "insular Orthodoxy." This response assumes that the only viable strategy to assure the continuity of the Jewish people is to distance oneself from modern culture and the many accompanying "contaminants." For the far larger segments of American Jews who seek to embrace both American culture and Jewish identity, the good news of a welcoming American culture presents a prodigious challenge. As Leonard Fein (1995) has written, the major threat we face is no longer rape but rather seduction. This is an unprecedented and monumental challenge that tests the capacity and willingness of Jews to live as identified and engaged Jews in the open society.

GOOD NEWS: LONG-TERM COMMITMENT

In the wake of the 1990 NJPS, many questioned whether the leadership of the American Jewish community could sustain its focus on a Continuity agenda. Could the community maintain its commitment to the long-term goal of strengthening Jewish identity when it was accustomed to experiencing visible and dramatic short-term results, such as rescuing Jews from countries of distress? Another inherent challenge was the implicit recognition that, unlike prior issues, the focus on Continuity is not about helping others. It requires every Jew to be engaged in strengthening one's own family and one's own identity. The challenge has changed from tangible and global issues to more amorphous personal ones.

The community has responded impressively to this daunting challenge as evidenced by the following facts:

- Virtually every significant community has established task forces and commissions, led by senior lay and professional leaders, frequently by federations. In many communities, substantial additive resources have been provided. For example, UJA-Federation of New York has allocated more than \$15 million in additive funds to this area since 1993 beyond the over \$9 million annually (as of 1998) provided for Jewish education through basic grants to the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York, Suffolk Association for Jewish Educational Services, Jewish Day Schools and Yeshivot, Hillels, and a range of Jewish educational programs in Israel. This does not include basic grants to the 27 Jewish Community Centers and Y's, 17 camps within New York's network of agencies, and Jewish educational programs provided by the Jewish Agency for Israel or the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.
- Successful initiatives such as Meah (100 hours of adult Jewish learning in Boston), the Partnership for Change Grants Program

of the Continuity Commission in New York (a partnership of UJA-Federation of New York with more than 100 local institutions to strategically plan for bold and major efforts), Jewish Education for Families (JEFF) in Detroit, and many other examples throughout the country are evidence of extraordinary new levels of engagement and participation in Jewish life.

- Philanthropists, often working in partnership with federations, have established focused national endeavors. They include initiatives that aim to increase the number of our youth who experience the power of an Israel Experience program (Israel Birthright), strengthen synagogues (Synagogue 2000, Experiment in Congregational Education), enhance programs on college campuses (Steinhardt Jewish Campus Service Corps), establish new day schools (Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education), and upgrade the quality of lay and professional leadership (Wexner and Wexner Heritage Foundations).
- Throughout North America, the growth of day schools—particularly in the non-Orthodox community—has been remarkable. Unprecedented dollars are being raised, and many new high schools are being built.
- The broad subject of Jewish identity, renewal, and continuity dominates our public discourse as reflected in Jewish media, including the Jewish weeklies, magazines, and books.
- A review of agendas of national and regional organizations, and the episodic meetings of many of our largest and most influential philanthropic leaders, reveals that the most frequently discussed issues relate to strengthening Jewish identification.

While identifying the most effective strategies may not be easy, one thing is clear. Over the past decade, the leadership of North American Jewry has demonstrated a commitment to sustain its focus, energy, and re-

sources on the interrelated set of issues identified as *Continuity*. This is a positive development and augurs well for the future of American Jewish life.

**EXAMPLES OF SUCCESS: NEW
EXPRESSIONS OF JEWISH
ENGAGEMENT**

It is difficult to describe success in an area that is as personal and complex as Jewish identity. Nevertheless, a few descriptions of the growing and deepening possibilities for connecting to Jewish life in new ways are instructive. The following three initiatives—representing a synagogue, camp, and cultural arts setting—provide illustrations from the New York Continuity Commission of effective strategies and their transformative potential.

**West End Synagogue (Manhattan): L’Dor
V’Dor—A Family Education Initiative**

Based on the synagogue’s findings from a comprehensive needs assessment, the lay and professional leadership embarked on developing and implementing educational opportunities that would provide families with the skills and knowledge to enhance their Jewish lives. Shabbat—a paradigm for spiritual experience, quality family time, and ritual observance—emerged as the focus for this initiative. The results of this initiative are tangible. A synagogue once bereft of children attending Shabbat morning services now has a core group of entire families participating on a weekly basis. Holiday programs are now overcrowded. Shabbat dinners have moved from a synagogue setting to small group family chavurot sharing this meal in each other’s homes. The synagogue held its first congregational retreat, and members are beginning to initiate programs specific to their interests. Critical to the development and ongoing success of this initiative is the Jewish educator who brings to her work an expertise in social work and Jewish family education, as well as a personal commitment to Jewish living. Furthermore, while initial research set the goals and visions for this initiative,

ongoing evaluation enabled it to remain dynamic and responsive to members’ needs.

**The Jewish Museum (Manhattan):
A Summer Arts Program for Teens**

Teenagers traditionally grapple with issues of identity. This intensive five-week summer arts program, based at the Jewish Museum and entering its fourth year this summer, is designed to provide teenage students with alternative means of exploring their Jewish identity. Through the efforts of guest artists and Jewish educators, as well as in-house exhibits, programs of Jewish literacy and identity are introduced. Simultaneously, students are exposed to a multiplicity of Jewish cultures and voices. The diversity within the participant group itself encourages the teens to challenge their own preconceptions of Jewish identity, practice, and expression. This unique learning experience also facilitates leadership development as students are encouraged to pursue internships at the museum upon completing the institute. In the words of one student, “The thought that I could make something that could actually be used to perform a ritual in incredible!”

**Berkshire Hills Emanuel Camps of Bronx
House (Copake, NY): Masoret—
An Intergenerational Jewish Cultural
Arts Program**

Intergenerational Jewish cultural programming has been the medium for promoting understanding, developing channels of communication, and fostering a binding Jewish spirit within this resident camp setting. This grant enabled the camp to hire a full-time Jewish cultural arts coordinator who developed an integrated thematic approach to summer programming. Dramatic presentations, artwork, music, dance, and observance all related to designated themes. Additional specialists in these areas were hired, as was a part-time rabbi, all of whom further infused this environment with a sense of living Judaism. In addition to the intergenerational components, the specialists and the rabbi

worked with different age groups to provide developmentally appropriate and personally meaningful avenues for Jewish exploration and identity formation.

As a result of these summer experiences, some counselors have taken advantage of additional opportunities for continued Jewish development through a leadership program in Israel. A camper who was not planning to celebrate a Bar Mitzvah approached the camp with his unique set of circumstances. Training and a Bar Mitzvah celebration the following summer were the results. Permanent banners, signs, and Jewish ritual objects created by campers are now prominently displayed, further adding to the Jewish ambiance of camp. Evidence of the successful integration of this project into the very fabric of camp life is the high rate of return of both campers and Jewish specialist staff members.

Looking ahead, plans are now underway to establish mechanisms by which the campers' Jewish growth and development from the summer can be maintained and enriched year round. Considerations include the creation and distribution of Jewish newsletters and study materials on a regular basis during the year; following up the Israel theme with Israeli pen pals through the Internet; providing information on Israel experiences as well as local Jewish resources; and connecting alumni with appropriate campus Hillels. This initiative further demonstrates the potential of the total Jewish environment to create transformational opportunities for Jews.

THE PLOT THICKENS: EXPERIENCE YIELDS COMPLEXITY

As time has passed and the community has gained more experience and greater confidence in its resolve to address the challenges of strengthening Jewish life, there is a growing appreciation of the complexity of these challenges. Most informed observers now acknowledge that there is no silver bullet, no magic answer, no Jewish inoculation that will ensure that we or our children will be engaged, literate, affiliated or in-married Jews.

There is also a growing recognition that we need a panoply of quality experiences and strong institutions to support them. Even the most powerful Jewish educational experience has little chance of affecting one's life choices if it remains an isolated experience. We must create manifold, high-quality Jewish experiences and institutions to give people options and guide people through the stages of their lives. The transformational experiences that have been identified through serious evaluations (see Kurshan et al., 1997-1999) conducted of Continuity initiatives in New York and elsewhere confirm the empirical observations and early research studies of the decade: Jewish day schools, Jewish summer camps, Jewish family education, Israel experiences, teen programming, efforts targeted at forging strong Jewish connections for the emigre community, campus-based outreach programs, creative opportunities for young adults and singles, and adult Jewish literacy programs are all critical in strengthening Jewish identity. No one intervention can be treated as an independent variable for Jewish identity. In fact, a newly completed research study, *Connections and Journeys*, sponsored by New York UJA-Federation's Jewish Continuity Commission and written by Dr. Bethamie Horowitz, shows that a succession of experiences from childhood through adulthood has a combined and reinforcing effect on Jewish identity. These experiences included regular synagogue attendance during upbringing, at least one year of Jewish schooling during childhood, Jewish summer camp, youth group involvement, Jewish studies classes, Hillel involvement, and having visited Israel.

Additionally, only excellent Jewish institutions that will enable Jews to experience the power of Jewish life will survive in America's cultural marketplace. There is a strong demand for settings in which individuals can experience transcendence, meaning, and community in a caring, high-quality environment. If American Jews are not able to find these qualities in Jewish institutional contexts, they will seek them elsewhere.

EMERGING CHALLENGES AND QUESTIONS

While there has been initial progress, new questions have emerged that will require collective planning in the years ahead. Seven threshold issues present themselves:

First, to what extent does the high cost of Jewish living impede participation in key gateway institutions and educational experiences, such as synagogues, community day schools, Jewish summer camps, and Israel Experience Programs (Woocher, 1999)? While many observers have claimed that day school tuition and Israel Experience fees create major barriers to increased participation, this assertion requires further study. For example, in Marblehead, Massachusetts, the availability of free Israel Experience trips increased participation in its first year, but participation rates returned to the lower levels shortly thereafter. Similarly, New York's experiment with free airfare to Israel for college students was disappointing.

Additionally, while some parents may decide not to enroll their children in such programs because of the financial costs, others contend that it has less to do with financial capacity than priorities. It should be noted that the most extensive day school system exists in the most traditional and observant part of the Jewish community that is also the least affluent. The issue of the importance of finances will be further tested in the Birth-right Israel program now being developed, but it is important to note that the assertion that cost is the sole barrier to increased participation or even the most significant is yet to be proven.

Second, what is the ability of federations and other regional and national entities—the religious denominations, foundations, and the seminaries—to be significant resources for strengthening critical local institutions? Certainly there is agreement that external bodies should provide additional financial support. Synagogues and day schools have bemoaned for years the lack of recognition and financial support accorded to them by communal institutions. The challenge re-

mains for external bodies to demonstrate that the resources they provide beyond funding, such as expertise, technical assistance, and consultants, are resources of value and significance. More difficult, the agendas of these external groups often reflect a "change agenda" to strengthen if not transform the local institution or augment its present program with a priority identified by the foundation or other regional or national entity. Such a change agenda is often deeply resented by the local institution as being unnecessary, arrogant, or both.

Third, emerging major philanthropists seek to transfer their experience from business into the Jewish communal setting. Having achieved astonishing economic success, often through a very focused and intense approach to their business, a growing number of philanthropists seek to have a similar impact on the Jewish communal context, which is exceedingly complex and diffuse. Moving forward, a challenge for professionals will be to harness effectively the commitment, resources, and passion of these philanthropists so they can have significant impact and be engaged long term in the communal effort to strengthen the overall fabric of American Jewish life.

Fourth, federations have not yet demonstrated their capacity to raise substantial additive funds for Jewish education. While multiple explanations abound, it appears that those who seek to support this agenda philanthropically support local institutions directly or develop initiatives independently. The symbolic and substantive significance of partnerships is a potential that is not yet fully realized. A notable exception is the successful raising of additive funds by several federations for Israel Experience Programs. In addition, in 1997, New York Federation's Continuity Commission joined with 11 major philanthropists to form the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education. Nevertheless, federations have yet to demonstrate their added value in raising philanthropic dollars for Jewish renewal.

Fifth, providing compelling opportunities

for Jewish learning and living requires the mobilization of the entire community. While much progress has been made during the past decade, the engagement of the health and human service agencies, for example, has been modest at best. One of the sterling achievements of American Jewry during the twentieth century has been the creation of a network of human service agencies, vocational training, child care, senior adults services, and Jewish family service agencies, which has changed the landscape of the entire human service sector in the United States. The agencies of the federation system are envied by every other ethnic and religious community for their standards of excellence and unparalleled performance. While continuing to serve Jewish communal needs, these agencies have grown exponentially since the 1960s, primarily as a result of their ability to access public funds. These agencies have enormous human resources with outstanding lay and professional leadership. They have extraordinary infrastructures that can help strengthen local institutions. But most important, these high-quality human service programs are the living actualization of our commitment to *Gemilut Hasidim*, to acts of lovingkindness. It is these agencies that take the lead in caring for those most in need and in realizing the prophetic demand to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and provide shelter for the homeless.

If we are to succeed in helping our gateway institutions become powerful, compelling, inspired, and abiding contexts for Jewish living, they must enable a broad spectrum of Jews to connect up to God (*bayn adam l'makom*), to connect deep into their own inner souls and essences (*bayn adam l'atzmo*), and to connect out to the broader community (*bayn adam l'havayro*). The human service agencies can become vital resources in enabling synagogues, community centers, camps, and Hillels to become "caring communities," where the act of caring (*Hesed*) reinforces and strengthens the communal fabric. To date, Continuity efforts have not succeeded in effectively engaging the prodigious resources of the Jewish human service sector.

During the next decade, more effective strategies must be developed. This will require the development of a shared language, as well as new modalities and strategies so that the human service agencies can become true partners in this effort.

A sixth major challenge relates to Jewish professional leadership. What additional pre-service and in-service programs will be needed to prepare Jewish communal professionals, rabbis, and educators to become more effective builders of compelling communities? Are professionals prepared to reconceptualize their roles to include this new dimension? And even more fundamentally, how can the community provide sufficient status and compensation so the "best and the brightest" will be recruited to the critical roles of Jewish teacher and principal? What steps will be needed to strengthen the community's capacity to compete with the open market so that young gifted Jews—who will be essential to our success—will be more likely to choose to enter the sacred work of Jewish education and Jewish communal service broadly understood? The Wexner Foundation has taken important first steps in this area, and the results of efforts can be useful in framing the problem and potential solutions. At present, a significant number of Jewish day schools are turning to first-rate non-Jewish educators to provide leadership for their schools. Senior positions in major Jewish educational institutions have remained vacant for want of high-quality candidates.

The importance of high-quality professionals in Jewish communal and educational institutions cannot be overemphasized. One of the consequences of living in an open society is that Jews now have the ability to be employed virtually anywhere. While this is a positive development, the need to create incentives, competitive compensation, and high-quality continuing professional education remains a challenge. Unless we do so, the ability of our community to respond to the opportunity of Jewish renewal will be limited.

Seventh, the historical imperative highlighted by the 1990 NJPS was to channel the formidable energy of the Jewish community from the public arena to the private realm (Wolpe, 1992). While we could take pride in the institutions and organizations we created, many if not most of our great edifices were bereft of soul. Gaining momentum from the wave of a burgeoning movement in America toward spirituality, the Continuity movement can take at least some credit for the flourishing of the inner search for meaning and transcendence. Jewish journey groups, Jewish spirituality sessions, Jewish meditation, and Jewish personal trainers abound. New Jewish healing services and new rituals for such life-cycle experiences as a miscarriage or a child leaving home have undoubtedly enriched Jewish life. Much of the Continuity endeavor has involved providing the seekers of our community with the guidance and opportunities to deepen their Jewish involvement. Strategies and programs have been developed that allow people to express a more immediate, personal, and spiritual connection to Jewish life. Yet, some 10 years later, some register caution that perhaps the focus inward has gone too far. Judaism is built on a communal identity. There are no Jews without the Jewish people, and there is no Judaism without the Jewish community. Collective responsibility and an appreciation for K'lal Yisrael may have been compromised along the way. Schisms in diverse religious denominational groups have compounded this challenge.

In reality, as Israel moves closer to peace and Jewish life regenerates, Jews throughout the world are facing similar challenges of defining a Judaism that can stand the test of modernity. We have more in common with other Jews worldwide than is widely recognized. The challenge of how to continue to deepen personal Jewish identity while strengthening our collective identity as a people is particularly salient today. Concern for the renewal of Jewish life must go hand in hand with a commitment to rebuild a sense of Jewish peoplehood.

CONCLUSION

As we enter the second decade of focus on the continuity agenda—now often referred to as renaissance and renewal—the community can take considerable pride in its emerging direction. Whereas at the outset of the 1990s there was little confidence that the leadership of the American Jewish community could sustain its interest and focus on a broad subject that would require long-term resolve, this has proven to be unsubstantiated. As noted earlier, American Jewish leadership has demonstrated its willingness and capacity to stay with this issue long term. Federations, philanthropies, and foundations, working in new alliances, are engaging in numerous initiatives to increase participation in quality educational settings and develop innovative approaches in the most powerful Jewish educational experiences that enhance excellence, strengthen gateway institutions, and develop innovative new approaches.

We are living in an extraordinary moment of Jewish history that affords unprecedented freedom, power, and possibilities. We also find ourselves in a moment of American history when more individuals are turning inward and seeking meaning, community, and a sense of the spiritual dimension in their lives. We have much to offer to enrich the lives of Jews! We must meet these challenges and continue in our resolve to deepen the lives of all Jews, to strengthen their connections to the Jewish community, and to reach toward God in the search for meaning and purpose.

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