

# RENEWING JEWISH LIFE THROUGH JEWISH CIVICS

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*Weakening ties to the Jewish community are paralleled by similar trends in American society which show a decline in civic commitment among Americans. The trends in both Jewish and American society are more pronounced among the younger age cohorts. The article points to some new educational and service initiatives that hold out the promise to meet the younger generation "where they are at." It also suggests that, properly contextualized, programs that connect Jews with social justice and service opportunities in general society hold out the greatest promise to get younger Jews re-connected to the Jewish community.*

So often, when those of us involved in the Jewish community contemplate the great challenges that face us, we fail to place our predicament into a larger societal context that may help us find solutions to those problems. We end up talking to the same people, reading the same books and periodicals, and interacting with the same organizational universe. It is not surprising that it sometimes seems as if we are going around in circles! We are.

Therefore, I would like to take a step back to reflect on what we, in the Jewish community call, our "Jewish identity problem." Everyone continues to cite the statistics that suggest that we are a vanishing people. Federations mobilize for ambitious campaigns to promote trips to Israel for teens, family education, and increased availability of Jewish camps and schools for families, all as part of their important continuity agendas. All of these programs will, no doubt, be helpful in enabling increased numbers of Jewish young people to have positive Jewish experiences, which will make them more likely to seek out Jewish identification when they get older. Still, there persists the nagging doubt whether

any or all of these measures have the strength to withstand the powerful draw of a secular culture that seems to draw Jews away from the Jewish community.

## A BREAKDOWN OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND CIVIC COMMITMENT

It is helpful to put our particular identity dilemma into a broader American context. John Gardner, former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching who served as Secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare in the late 1960s and went on to found Common Cause (1970) and Independent Sector (1979), has been one of the singular voices in America on the issue of citizen responsibility as it bears on the quality of our communal and national life. As a writer and activist, Gardner has tried to address the disengagement of Americans from the governmental and non-governmental forces that control their lives.

In an essay entitled "National Renewal" Gardner (1995) wrote:

We are seeing the collapse of communities of obligation and commitment. One reason for the decline in the observance of ethical values is that the soil in which such values are rooted and nurtured—the family and community—is being blown away in the dust storm of American life. Individuals torn loose from a context

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The Washington Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values is an educational foundation advancing *tikkun olam*, activism and civic engagement by American Jews, grounded in Torah and Jewish values. Its major programs include *Panim el Panim: High School in Washington*, the Jewish Civics Initiative and the *E Pluribus Unum* Project.

of community and shared values lose the conviction that they can influence the events and circumstances of their lives and the world around them. Obvious consequences are discouragement, frustration, and anger. A less obvious consequence is diminution of individual responsibility and commitment.

What Gardner is talking about is a breakdown of social responsibility and civic commitment, and the evidence supporting his observations is overwhelming. The Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA found in its most recent survey that interest in government and politics among college freshman is at an all-time low. Two-third of those surveyed felt that there was nothing they could do to change society. A complementary study by the Pew Research Center entitled "For the People and the Press" noted the irony that the generation that has come of age with unprecedented access to information via technology and, in particular, the Internet, and with longer term exposure to formal education than at any time in history is, nevertheless, far more ignorant of current issues than any previous generation of Americans. It is not coincidental that participation in the political process as measured by voting has also dropped precipitously among young people. In the past twenty years voting among young people aged 18-24 has dropped from 50 to 36 percent (Higher Education, 1988).

Cynicism about the American political system is widespread among young people today. They have been given little reason to believe that their active engagement in social and political issues matters. An earlier study, published by People for the American Way (1989), found that young people cherish America's freedoms without understanding what it takes to preserve them; that today's youth are far less inclined to be politically involved than previous generations; and that personal happiness and professional success are far higher priorities than any interest in communal or public involvements that might benefit society as a whole.

The health of a democracy can be measured by the level of involvement of its citi-

zens, and the indicators are not good. Educators and public officials are painfully aware that American society has failed to inculcate in its citizenry a deep and abiding commitment to civics. Ironically, the very dissipation of the threat to democracy from without has raised concerns about the threats to democracy from within.

For a time, the Jewish community seemed immune from this trend. As an immigrant community arriving at these shores, Jews were profoundly aware of how much more freedom and opportunity were available to them in this country than in Europe. Jews threw themselves into the business of becoming good Americans. Participation in the work of the Jewish community as well as an increasing involvement in issues of concern to the general society characterized the "civics" of American Jews. Jews voted in far greater numbers than the general population. They joined and came to lead numerous organizations dedicated to social justice and welfare. As Jews became more prosperous, their money became the engine that helped underwrite many such causes.

Politics became a natural venue for Jewish civic activity. Leonard Fein in *The Inner Life of American Jews* observes that even non-traditional Jews remained "messianic," but their religion became politics. In other words, Jews took a religious impulse and translated it into the world of politics. Jews first entered the political arena through the civil service, which allowed bright and talented Jews to enter into government service. Over the course of the last decade, Jews have moved from background staff positions to increasingly prominent elected and appointed offices. A not insignificant indicator of the acceptance that Jews enjoy in America is the fact that by the 1990s one could count ten Jews in the U.S. Senate and between 30-40 Jewish members of the House of Representatives, some from districts with virtually no Jewish population.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Jews came to enjoy such an influential role in American politics over the last few decades. In stark contrast to the failure of the Jewish

community to gain adequate access to the Roosevelt administration in order to obtain help for European Jewry during the Holocaust, in the second half of the twentieth century the Jewish community became legendary for its ability to influence American public policy. This influence manifested itself most obviously in securing support for the plight of Soviet Jews and for the State of Israel. But the Jewish community was, as well, a key player in many other causes, including civil rights, women's rights, separation of church and state, human rights, and economic opportunities for the disadvantaged of society.

Today, the Jewish community is still, arguably, the most politically active and influential ethnic/religious group in America. Yet, there are alarming trends that suggest that this might not continue to be the case. The National Jewish Population Survey conducted by the Council of Jewish Federations in 1990 (Kosman et al., 1991) found that the younger generation of American Jews had a far lower commitment to support the State of Israel and other oppressed Jewish populations around the world than their parents' generation. The study also found that the younger generation of Jews was less inclined to support the institutions that organize and mobilize the Jewish community, such as federations and community relations councils.

All of which points in the direction of Jewish civics. A Jewish community that is far more assimilated into American society than ever before is going to manifest less and less of the traits of an immigrant ethnic community struggling to make its mark on the host culture. Where once it was natural for American Jews to interact with American society through Jewish intermediary agencies, today it is increasingly likely that Jews will mainstream into every sector of American society as Jewish Americans. The end result of such a development is the progressive weakening of the fabric of the Jewish community.

If John Gardner frets over the abandonment of civic commitment on the part of Americans, the Jewish community worries

no less about the extent to which increasing numbers of Jews no longer feel any strong connection to organized Jewish life. The fact that the Jewish community shares this dilemma with American society at large provides little solace; it may, however, help put the problem into the kind of broader context that might point to some long-term strategies and solutions.

### **JEWISH CITIZENSHIP**

Civics is a word used to describe the range of rights and responsibilities of being a citizen in a given society. The ability to convey an understanding of civics to members of society is basic to the preservation of a democratic form of government. But whole societies are not the only structures that call for participatory citizenship. Any voluntary organization or community of people is made up of individuals who are enlisted in an implicit contract with the larger entity. Sometimes that contract involves paying dues (being a member of a swim club). Sometimes it involves regular attendance (a student in a school). Both of these simple examples portray civic responsibilities that, when fulfilled, entitle the individual to certain rights.

In the case of the Jewish community, membership is multidimensional and carries certain rights and responsibilities. The responsibilities of this "Jewish citizenship" include being a dues-paying member of a synagogue, visiting Israel with some frequency, or contributing money to UJA/federation campaigns or to a host of other worthwhile social justice and social service causes. Numerous other examples could be given, all of which are recognized as valid ways of being a citizen of the Jewish people. Many Jews participate in more than one mode of identification with Jewish institutions, culture, and history. Some participate in none.

The primary "right" of Jewish citizenship is the privilege of feeling part of an historical community of significance that still sets for itself the goal of transforming the world into a kingdom of righteousness. The more one participates in and contributes to the life of

the Jewish people, the more one comes to "own" that sense of belonging.

How do we measure the extent to which Jews feel this sense of belonging? Jewish identity is an elusive concept. Sociologists can measure the percentage of Jews who light Chanukah candles, join synagogues, or intermarry. However, they cannot measure the number of Jews who feel themselves to be part of the Jewish people. The measurable behavior of many such people may give scant indication that they are Jews, yet these are both marginally and potentially affiliated Jews. Some of these Jews cycle in and out of Jewish affiliations, and others would be inclined to join a synagogue or contribute to a campaign under the right circumstances. But the reality of the Jewish people as we enter the dawn of a new century is that the marginally/potentially affiliated Jews outnumber those who are committed.

Recognizing this reality calls for a radically different approach to the Jewish education of children and to outreach to the unaffiliated. In short, it calls for education for Jewish citizenship. In the same way that adult converts to Judaism must do more than learn about the Jewish religion, all Jews, young and old, must have some exposure to the responsibilities of being part of the Jewish people. This entails an understanding of the political matrix in which Jews might relate to Israel, expectations of financial commitments to a host of causes and organizations, and obligations to a community that seeks to perpetuate a minority subculture in America.

#### **THE NEW BREED OF AMERICAN JEW**

For too long the mainstream Jewish community has been making assumptions about Jews that are no longer accurate. The Baby Boomer generation and the various "lettered" generations that follow were born after World War II. Coming into their own professionally and as leaders in society, they have a vastly different psyche than the generation of Jews who built the Jewish organizational structure that is currently in place.

- They do not respond viscerally to appeals based on the Holocaust or the State of Israel.
- They do not defer automatically to religious or communal authority figures.
- They do not derive their sense of place in American society primarily based on their Jewish connections.

This does not make this generation of Jews, bad Jews. They are simply a new breed of Jew, and to channel their loyalties in the direction of the Jewish people will require understanding them better.

The new breed of American Jew is aware of the historical persecution of Jews, but does not have a persecution complex. They are sensitive to anti-Semitism because of the lessons of the Holocaust, but they do not mistrust gentiles in the way that did Jews who were born in Europe and who lived through World War II. For similar reasons, new-breed American Jews are not as willing to excuse Israel her every excess because of what Jews went through or justify it because of security threats. The moral judgments that younger Jews make tend to be more universal and are as likely to move them to sympathize with the cause of the Palestinians as with Israel.

The legacy of the 1960s and the Watergate era combined to make this generation of Jews far more suspicious of any mode of hierarchy or authority figure. Even the workplace has responded to this generational bias and now offers greater opportunities for participatory management. Young Jews are therefore not willing to defer to autocratic synagogues or to heavy-handed federations. Fewer and fewer young Jews are making the decision to become part of the organized Jewish community, and they are devoting their passion and energies to activities outside the rubric of Jewish life. If Jewish institutions are serious about doing outreach and are prepared to be open to the input of newcomers, young Jews will be drawn in. If not, young Jews who have little sense that they must affiliate or must give to Jewish causes, will not.

## STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE CIVIC COMMITMENT

There need to be two strategies to address this wholesale breakdown of Jewish civic commitment. One has to do with learning and the other with doing.

If we ask ourselves how it is that American public education tries to teach citizenship to students, we find that they teach American history, a little bit about government, and then attempt to give students some firsthand exposure to how they can be part of the political process. Now American society may not be doing a very good job at transmitting a sense of civic responsibility to young Americans. Educators are recognizing that something more needs to be added to the mix, but no one thinks that any of the basics can be eliminated. If we ask ourselves how synagogue schools and even day schools transmit such information to young Jews, we recognize how much work lies ahead of us.

What is the goal of Jewish civic education? First it is the task of telling the Jewish story, which amounts to much more than teaching Jewish history. It is the story of Jewish commitment to the well-being of their fellow Jews around the world and of the Jewish commitment to social justice for all of humanity. It is the story of how a community that was powerless to help European Jews during the Holocaust became, in a relatively short period of time, the most politically sophisticated sub-community in America. It is appreciating the galaxy of Jewish organizations that form an international polity, acting on behalf of the welfare and safety of the Jewish people, as well as on a commitment to create a better world for all humanity. Finally, serious teaching of Jewish civics requires an examination of how the classical texts of the Jewish tradition have served as the foundation for a values orientation that can help us think about the "Jewish way" to engage in issues of social justice. A people that understands the significance of the teaching that human beings are created *b'tzelem elohim*, in the image of God, cannot function in the political realm with a sole focus on

group self-interest and self-preservation.

Jews can and should take pride in this story. More importantly, they should live it. It is critical to cultivate in young Jews a sense of civic responsibility for the issues and institutions that occupy the American public square. While this case can be well made on the basis of American citizenship, there is also a clear mandate for such civic duty from the sacred texts and historical experience of the Jewish people. An even greater challenge, however, is to combine passionate involvement with American society and politics with ongoing reverence for the Jewish tradition and commitment to the Jewish community. The goal is for a young person to walk away with an understanding that to be a Jew is tantamount to being a citizen of the Jewish people.

Of course, the best kind of learning comes from doing, and this brings us to the second strategy for the renewal of Jewish life through Jewish civics. Recently, educators in the United States have made a major commitment to make community service a staple of the educational experience of young adults. A recent study conducted by Independent Sector (1996) revealed that 59 percent of teenagers engage in some form of community service, and over 90 percent of teens surveyed said that they would volunteer if asked. The past decade has brought tremendous new energy to the entire field of community service in America. In addition to non-profit ventures like Campus Contact, the Campus Outreach Opportunity League and Youth Service America, all created in the 1980s, the National and Community Service Act of 1990 created the Corporation for National Service, which has helped raise the profile and funding for many forms of community service for young people. Shirley Sagawa (1993), one of the leaders in the field of community service and former executive vice-president of the Corporation for National Service, notes that a key benefit of service is its ability to develop active citizens whose engagement also extends to awareness of current social and political issues and higher participation in the

political process as measured by such activities as voting.

There are some encouraging signs that the Jewish community is beginning to recognize the importance of community service, using service experiences to deepen the commitment of Jews to Judaism and to the Jewish community. During this past year two innovative programs that provided young Jewish adults with a year-long engagement with community service or community organizing were launched—AVODAH out of New York and the Jewish Organizing Initiative out of Boston. The American Jewish World Service has offered a Jewish Volunteer Corps for individuals willing to spend from one to six months overseas in a developing country. The Washington Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values' Jewish Civics Initiative engages high-school students in social change and community service projects all around the United States. Many of these younger Jewish organizations are now coming together in a Jewish service partnership that will be launching a web site and making it easier for young Jews to find Jewish contexts for their impulse to engage in service and *tikkun olam* work.

Still we are only scratching the surface. My sense is that an organized effort to place Jews in places where they can perform service to those less fortunate members of our society would attract tens of thousands of Jews who would not otherwise cast their lot with the Jewish community. In Washington, over 1,500 Jews volunteer on Christmas Day through the D.C. JCC. Yachad, a Jewish organization addressing low-income housing needs in downtown Washington, recruits hundreds of volunteers for a Sukkot in April program that helps renovate houses of low-income people. Synagogues get hundreds of volunteers for Mitzvah Days, and though some would dismiss this social action engagement as too superficial and too infrequent, the fact is that it represents an interest that can be built on.

Many younger Jews who are disinclined to become part of the organized Jewish commu-

nity will say that all the community wants out of them is their money. What if the community came to those same Jews and asked of them precisely what the biblical prophets would have asked of any Jews in any generation—to give of their plenty to the poor, the widow, and the orphan? What if such efforts were combined with the study of the very Jewish texts that made such action a *mitzvah*? What if cells of young Jewish volunteers working in soup kitchens, homeless shelters, with AIDS patients, in environmental cleanup projects, or tutoring inner-city children were then organized for Shabbat potluck dinners as well? And then began to study together? And then reached out to youth groups so that more and more service activity could be intergenerational?

The list of "what if" could go on and on. Step back from it and you see the makings of Jewish renewal and renaissance.

In his essay, "National Renewal," John Gardner (1995) offers a three-part remedy to the social disintegration that has become so much a part of the American landscape. First he calls for "citizen deliberation"—a commitment to deepen the understanding of Americans of the basic issues that confront us as a nation. Second is "citizen involvement," a call to go far beyond election-day citizenship in which one feels that civic duty is dispensed with merely by voting on election day. Citizen involvement requires people to band together to monitor the quality of our schools, to become custodians of our public spaces, to be watchdogs of the conduct of the business community that affects every aspect of our life, and to be engaged in the discussions that lead to the public policies that govern our society. Third, Gardner calls for a wholesale commitment to community service in which millions of Americans devote increased amounts of volunteer time to the organizations and institutions in our community that contribute to the common good.

In reflecting on Gardner's prescription for national renewal, I am struck with the parallel to the teaching of *Pirkei Avot* about the three pillars on which our world stands.

Community deliberation is essentially *Torah*. Involvement is the Jewish commitment to *avodah*. And community service suggests the Jewish mandate for us to engage in *gemilut chasadim*.

Some two centuries after Jewish emancipation, it is amazing that so many who care about the Jewish future still think about the community as if we were still ghettoized. It is clear that the trends and forces in American society affect Jews far more powerfully than anything that we manufacture in the Jewish community. It thus behooves us to think about the solutions to our communal viability in the larger context of American life. We will find there allies in thought and in action that will surprise us. If we are broad minded enough and forward thinking enough, joining forces with these allies may lead to a communal renewal that will be part of a larger national renewal that will enrich us all.

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