

**THE FUTURE OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY:
*LO ZU HADERECH***

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I am pleased to be able to respond to Professor Elazar's paper. He was my undergraduate advisor at Temple University, appropriately enough in the context of his paper, in the Department of American Studies. Since then I have had the opportunity to continue to learn from him both in the United States and in Israel. His insights into Jewish life, and especially American Jewish life, have stimulated me and helped shape my own approach to the study of this community.

Nevertheless, I do not share all of his conclusions concerning the future of the Jewish community. In particular, I am pleased to report that the Jeremiads are not dead yet. I therefore wish to focus my response on his reasons for cautious optimism by raising an issue that must be addressed if we are to accept his modestly optimistic view of the future of the American Jewish community.

Here I part company with our distinguished awardee on a critical point, the possibility of the renewal of a sense of covenant under the present circumstances in American Jewish life. Elazar argues that at least some of the innovations coming from within the formal institutions of the American Jewish community may have the effect of strengthening the sense of community and covenant. Since he does not specify which programs he thinks are accomplishing these goals it is impossible to say with certainty whether he would agree to any extent with the views I am about to present. However, I think the bottom line is that rather than building a stronger community, much of what is going on today, especially under the fashionable rubric of "Jewish Identity Programming," may accelerate the process of assimilation and further undermine the sense of community and covenant that he identifies as so critical to Jewish continuity.

At its core "identity" is a psychological construct most often used to refer to qualities of the individual rather than to relations between the individual and larger social structures. I believe that the word "identity" was well chosen in that it reflects an emphasis in "Jewish Identity Programming" on the personal and psychological, on how a person feels rather than communal (conventional) and social concerns, i.e., on what a person is committed to. Further, the selection of the

term "Jewish identity" may reveal not only the method by which community leadership expects to recapture the allegiance of American Jews but much about the content of the nature of that allegiance as understood by the same community leaders. By this I mean that such "identity" must be some lowest common denominator. Otherwise, it must be within a system of a way of being Jewish to deal with G-d, Torah and Israel. In other words, Jewish Identity may not be good for the Jews.

In short, I believe that at least some of the innovative programs offered by the community may be accelerating the very process that the proponents of such programs intend to delay. Because of limited space, I cannot develop this idea completely, but I suggest that there is a central aspect to many of the "identity" programs now being promulgated in the Jewish community that will have the effect of lessening an already tenuous link of many American Jews to the concept of a covenantal community. In the words of a famous observer of Jewish identity issues earlier in this century, *lo zu daderech*, this is not the way.

The essence of my argument is that many (but certainly not all) of such programs are focused on the perceived instrumental value of Jewish life and Judaism to fulfill individual goals. In selecting this emphasis, the programs ignore the values of Jewish life that may run counter to the themes of personal self-actualization, especially those values that place the community before the individual. Being Jewish in the context of such programs is no longer "a way of life," it becomes instead "a lifestyle." A quote ascribed to the most recent Council of Jewish Federations (CJF) draft document on Jewish Identity says that the community's goal

...must be to make Jewish identity more central and meaningful for more Jews, not just for the sake of the community's future, but because of Judaism's life enriching power.

That is, an emphasis on the individual rather than on the community informs much of the programming in this area. Such emphasis on the individual is an important component of Protestant and therefore American thought, but it is alien to a belief system that places primary emphasis on the importance of the group and obligations to the maintenance of other members of the community, such as the widow and the orphan, above activities focused on the self.

A focus on the instrumental value of Jewish identity for self-growth is part and parcel of the entire spectrum of community activity. In a December 1994 issue of *The New York Times*, *Tikkun* ran an ad

which, after paying appropriate lip service to the poor and the oppressed, came to the conclusion that the reason liberal ideas are not in favor is that liberals have failed to address the spiritual angst of the middle class, a problem *Tikkun* is now going to tackle. On the other end of the political spectrum, the director of the new right of center group "Toward Tradition" argues that if more Christians understood the *family values* core of Judaism, there would be less anti-Semitism. Putting aside for the moment the questionable validity of that statement, it once again demonstrates the salience of arguments based on the instrumental value of Jewish life to those who claim to speak for various segments of the community.

In a profound way the American Jewish community has moved away from covenant and a sense of commitment beyond self, while remaining in an institutional form that developed from the importance of group and covenant. The synagogue, *beit kneset* in Hebrew, is after all the house of assembly first, and only later the house of prayer and study. One could forget this when so many synagogues offer opportunities for "personal growth."

The new emphasis on "identity" is, as some Jewish educators have pointed out, often focused on "feeling good" about being Jewish rather than on Jewish knowledge. It is hard to imagine a less traditionally Jewish concept than making personal feelings a higher goal than learning, but as I note below, the contemporary community has accomplished even this almost impossible task.

In fact, only with a profound lack of Jewish knowledge could some of these programs be put into practice. One popular program for enhancing Jewish identity uses Hasidim as an example of Jews who express the enviable values of "freedom, spontaneity, and letting go." While such attitudes are not characteristic of Hasidim, to say the least, such statements make traditional Judaism seem in accord with contemporary American values. There is often an expectation that the product of "identity programming" will be some outward sign (selection of marriage partner, affiliation with institutions and organizations, philanthropy) without any clear idea of what knowledge, values and beliefs might lead to these outward expressions of identity.

In sum, the "identity" often being promulgated is based on the experiences, values and assumptions of the leadership of the community and is one that comfortably fits into their world. The willingness of the community to accept a self-portrait drawn often exclusively from community surveys, a method which will most often miss those who are unable to answer such questions because of problems like illness

and poverty, speaks volumes about the desire of the community to confirm their own self-image. For all their talk about distinctive "Jewish values," most leaders, and I suspect not a few researchers, have missed how profoundly influenced by contemporary America, "American Jewish" thinking is. For example, older Jews routinely refuse to pay for services from Jewish agencies because, in their words, they have been paying into a "Jewish social security system" for years and now they should reap the benefits. No talk of *tzedaka* or Jewish values for these Jews. The activities and meaning of these Jewish organizations are understood entirely in terms familiar to contemporary Americans such as "social security."

In conclusion, I think the problem is most poignantly expressed by Elazar's reference to the obligation to the widow and the orphan as an example of the nature of the covenantal contract. These are the very persons being abandoned in the rush to build "Jewish Identity." Funding for the widow and the orphan are cut back and sometimes cut out by federations across the country under the very dubious argument that without Jewish Identity programming there will be no Jews to support these services. The argument is dubious because without the core covenantal commitment to the widow and the orphan we will probably wind up with no services and no Jews.

What such planning decisions say to the children and adults who are the supposed beneficiaries of Jewish Identity programming is anybody's guess. Perhaps the teaching of Jewish identity, if it is to really mean something more than another way to participate in an increasingly self-absorbed form of middle-class American life should begin by reminding its students where tradition placed the obligation of caring for the widow and the orphan in relation to the value of such "identity activities" as ritual and prayer.

We should all be mindful, then, of the opinion of the value of this contemporary strategy as stated by a keen observer of the meaning of Jewish identity in his day, the Prophet Isaiah, who said,

Your new moons and fixed seasons fill Me with loathing.
They are become a burden to Me, I cannot endure them ...
Though you pray at length, I will not listen Learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice. Aid the wronged, uphold the rights of the orphan, defend the cause of the widow ...
says the Lord. (Excerpts from Isaiah 1:1318).