Chapter 7

TRANSCENDING THE PROGRESSIVE SOLUTION

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The generation that inherited the results of World War II — Jews included — was the first of the postmodern epoch, and as such it faced a new set of problems peculiar to its circumstances. These problems, to be sure, had their roots in the era just ended, but they stemmed most immediately from the needs and concerns of a generation that grew up in a society strikingly different from its predecessors.

That generation rose to the challenge at home. They completed the task of entrenching American Jewry and its community within American society, giving it a form suitable both to Jewry and the society in which it found itself. Abroad they saved the remnant of European Jewry, assisted mightily in the establishment of the Jewish state and its consolidation, and helped world Jewry to either relocate in Israel or to rebuild their diaspora communities.

By the mid-1970s, that first generation had run its course and the second postmodern generation began to move onto center stage. The latter have inherited the tasks facing the inhabitants of the postmodern epoch, in part to continue the work begun by their predecessors and in part to face new problems inherent in the new epoch. These are problems that arise out of the well nigh

full acceptance of Jews by the general society and the massive assimilation that has resulted, problems that arise as Holocaust memories fade and anti-Semitism reasserts itself, and from the transformation of traditional American liberalism into a kind of multicultural underdoggism which places the Jews among the top dogs, hence among those to be displaced, and views Israel as an encroachment upon indigenous peoples who are to be favored. Thus the new generation has had its work cut out for it.

American Jewish community organization as we know it was developed during the Progressive era and indeed is a product of the organization theories of the Progressives, including the reliance upon professional managers and experts functioning under the general policy-making direction of non-professionals, federated organizational structures, emphasis on localism and local problem-solving, reliance on functional organizations rather than upon traditional patterns of communal activity in the philanthropic sphere, and the treatment of philanthropic activities as civic activities to be fully insulated from politics.

This Progressive approach has remained dominant in Jewish community organization to the present and has contributed no small share to the amazing growth and vitality of Jewish organizational life. Indeed, this Progressive dimension has been one of the secrets of the success of the organized Jewish community. Now, however, nearly a century after the end of the Progressive movement as an identifiable force, parts of this Progressive-Jewish synthesis may be unravelling.

Not only are lay and professional roles becoming blurred, but as the American Jewish community becomes involved in the larger Jewish world, the distinction between the civic and political dimensions of organized Jewish life are also becoming less distinct. Other Jewish communities and, most especially, Israel, never adopted the distinction. For them, public affairs are inevitably political. This has led to clashes between the American Jews and the others in the world Jewish arena, but it also has influenced the American Jewish leadership, moving them more into politics than ever before.

Progressivism was based upon a serious public spiritedness. What we are seeing in the world around us is massive privatization, a shift of focus even on the part of leaders from the public to the private sphere and the pursuit of private goals

rather than public ones through philanthropy. In a complex world where elements of mass society seem to be pressing in on individuals at an increasingly rapid rate, people seek to direct their voluntary activities where they feel that they still have choice, to the private sphere.

Since the American Jewish community is, both of necessity and desire, a voluntary one, this has the consequences of weakening support for and interest in communal institutions, not only through greater fragmentation but for declining public concern of the kind needed to make the community work. The federation movement suffers from this as do all other Jewish organizations. After a brief moment when local federations were seen as the fading institutions of the Jewish community and their leaders as the community's leaders, they are being returned to the status of one set of organizations among many whose leaders are there by their choice but have no claim beyond that. If this trend continues, it will be a major blow to the efforts to develop a Jewish community in the United States.

At a time when the new organizational theories are emphasizing the virtues of many competing units, it is not surprising that American Jews, along with other Americans, are finding their way back to a more diffused system. While just as the organizational diffusion called for by the present organization theorists works only because of the existence of strong federal and state framing institutions, so too is it likely to work in the Jewish community as long as the local and countrywide framing institutions remain strong. Today the trends are pulling in two directions. Within the federation family there is a trend toward centralization, while the scope of activities of the agencies may be undergoing some reduction as people choose to give their support to other organizations as is easy to do in a voluntary community. The great spheres of communal activity continue to grow closer together, but the institutions within those spheres may be further dividing. As always, then, contradictory trends exist side by side.

Since Jewish life in the United States rests so heavily on the civic premises of American civil society, premises not understood very well outside of the English-speaking world, as the United States and American Jews become more a part of the rest of the world, they find those premises being increasingly chal-

lenged. Either American Jewry will have to adjust or the world will have to change, but the kind of separation that allowed American Jews to live in the luxury of the American experience has diminished greatly and will diminish further. It took a period of acculturation for American Jews to learn to accept and prefer the American models and there is no reason to believe that they cannot be reacculturated, if it is necessary to do so, away from those models.

New Directions in the Jewish Polity

The postwar generation was a crucial one in Jewish history. After a three-hundred-year thrust toward communal fragmentation, the Jewish people in the United States and worldwide has moved itself around toward some real measure of reintegration. The establishment of the State of Israel, the reconstitution of diaspora communities in the wake of World War II, and the institutionalization of the American Jewish community as a polity all reflect the new condition.

The thrust of the modern era, beginning in the mid-seventeenth century and accelerating thereafter, was to fragment world Jewry. The tight communal organization of the Middle Ages was the first to give way. It was followed by the abandonment of life according to Jewish law on the part of a growing number of Jews (a majority by the twentieth century). In the past two generations even traditional ties to the community were abandoned by a majority of Jews, as they sought full integration as individuals into the larger society, leading to what seemed to be the ultimate fragmentation of world Jewry. In all of this American Jewry was in the vanguard. Traditional communal organization never existed in America, since it never had any legal support. Life according to Jewish law (or even Jewish tradition) was never the style of the majority. Pursuit of individual goals was always far more possible in the New World than anywhere else.

Then in the postwar generation, when fragmentation reached new heights, a movement toward reintegration around new vehicles and norms began to gain momentum. The Holocaust opened the door to a reconsideration of the need for Jewish

unity. This plus the simple passage of time contributed to the postmodern breakdown of the rigid ideologies that divided Jews in the last third of the modern era (mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries). Finally, and most important, the establishment of the State of Israel has given Jews a new and compelling focus that continues to enhance the interest of many in being Jewish. Israel's crucial role as a generator of Jewish ties regardless of other differences was effectively demonstrated at the time of the Six-Day War.

The second postwar generation completed some of the work begun in the first and moved on to new challenges. Simultaneous with its beginning, the shift in the balance of the *ketarim* was completed. After at least 1,600 years of dominance by the *keter torah,* the *keter malkhut* again became the most powerful domain of authority in the Jewish people. The change had begun in the middle of the nineteenth century as more Jews became secularized. The response of the *keter torah* was to fragment. Different of its representatives championed different approaches to Torah to respond to the loss of power of Jewish religion. This was true among Orthodox as well as non-Orthodox. In the West, the latter had been the cutting edge of Judaism for a century or more, while in the East it took the Holocaust, World War II, and the establishment of Israel to end Orthodox dominance of the hearts and minds of the Jewish public.

The rivalries between the various claimants of the *keter torah* were such that by the second post-modern generation the only place they would sit together was in institutions of the *keter malkhut.* Meanwhile, the power of the *keter malkhut* had been growing. Jews reentered the world political arena — the establishment of the Zionist movement was a giant step forward in that direction. An even bigger step was success in reestablishing a Jewish state, whose authoritative position rapidly became unchallenged and remains so, principally through its *malkhut* institutions. Indeed, the ability of the institutions of the *keter malkhut* to maintain Jewish unity, and even to strengthen it, is a major factor in the contemporary Jewish polity.

What has happened in the world scene has happened on a somewhat smaller scale in American Jewry. The *keter torah* has fragmented and the fragmentation is becoming greater, and the

keter malkhut has developed unifying institutions that are growing in strength.

What all of this reflects is the reemergence of a world Jewish polity and the progressive discovery of the American Jewish community that they are an indivisible part of that polity. American Jewry has moved from being merely linked to being intertwined with the world Jewish polity and the issues it faces. The test put before those who aspire to senior leadership in American Jewry is, increasingly, world Jewish involvement, whether in the use of its public funds or in its directly political activity.

Much of the present generation has been devoted to building an institutional framework for the renewed world Jewish polity, just as the last was engaged in doing the same for the American Jewish polity. This task, with all its problematics, is still underway; but the environment in which it has been carried out, in the way of new technology or in the way of greater involvement of the United States as a whole in a common world order, is all reinforcing the effort.

Accompanying this rediscovery of polity among those Jews who care to be Jews is a reintegration of the organizational components of the Jewish community, leading to the emergence of a more clear-cut structure and communications network linking them. More important, there has been an increase in the commitment of different kinds of organizations to the essential wholeness of the Jewish way of life. The rediscovery itself is clearly rooted in the acceptance of a new pluralism in Jewish life, one that is reflected in the organizational structure of the Jewish community. Pluralism, organized in a more or less permanent structural arrangement, leads to federalism, and federalism has been the traditional way Jews have maintained their organizational structures in the face of the various internal and external pressures they have confronted. As we have seen, contemporary Jews are no exception.

All this may well represent a beginning in the efforts to overcome the fragmentation of Jewish life produced by revolutionary liberalism and socialism, on one hand, and American Protestantism, on the other. Given a new growth in the will to be Jewish among some American Jews, the Jewish community of the coming generation is likely to pursue this reintegration,

which also involves the reintegration of American Jewry with world Jewry, as its central political thrust.

Organizationally, the American Jewish community generally is in good condition. American Jewry may well have discovered a pattern for itself that can meet the challenges of communal governance within a free society. Organizational advances, however, will not solve the problem of the individual Jews who must decide whether or not to be seriously Jewish or, more and more, Jewish at all.

The decisions of the multitude of American Jewish individuals have become part and parcel of America. Their lives are far more shaped by American rhythms than by Jewish ones. They have brought American Jewry to the edge of a religious, cultural, and demographic abyss. We may have the institutions needed to preserve a full and rich Jewish life in the United States, but on this question all institutions can do is to try to facilitate positive decisions on behalf of Jewishness on the part of the population they serve.

Unfortunately, here is where federations are weakest. Despite the sincere devotion and goodwill of their leaders, few have either the Jewish education or the Jewish cultural resources needed to provide the impetus for the kind of revival that is needed among American Jews to alter these unfortunate trends. They, themselves, have at least partially become aware of this. By 1995 — again paralleling new concerns in American life generally — calls were heard within the federations for "a new spirituality," an effort to come to grips with the need for Jewish revival in the most fundamental sense in order to have a revival of Jewish institutions in the more practical sense. As of yet there are no real signs that this "new spirituality" movement goes very deep or involves more than a more daring periphery of the federation leadership. For the most part, the current federation leaders remain more interested in restructuring than in respiritualizing. Nor is it clear that a new spirituality would be sufficiently grounded in Jewish culture to make a Jewish difference, whatever other human difference it might make for its adherents.

In sum, as the federation movement enters its second century it is faced with a very different set of problems than at its founding when essentially it had to cope with the practical

problems of more efficient and effective fundraising and allocation, how to integrate Jews from different backgrounds into one community, and how to bring some order to highly fragmented communities. The federation movement was born and developed around those practical problems. To ask it now to shift to a very different set of practical problems that go far beyond the by now homely needs of organization is a great deal to expect. Whether or not the federations can rise to that challenge is a matter of speculation in their centennial year.