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BUILDING COMMUNITY AMONG THE marginally AFFILIATED

Steven M. Cohen

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The late 1960s and the early 1970s have only recently begun to be appreciated as an extraordinary period of social change for American society and for the American Jewish community. In the late 1960s, social, cultural and political patterns were changing at a much faster pace than before, and at a faster pace than they did afterward. Moreover, the changes that were taking place across America were reflected in both substance and tempo in changes that took place among American Jews, albeit in a fashion peculiar to American Jewry.

The Rise of the Unconventional

Several notable trends in both the society at large and the American Jewish community are found in the demographic arena. Since the late 1960s, the educational achievements and professional aspirations of young women rose dramatically, especially those of Jewish women. The average marrying age for well-educated Americans, including American Jews, moved upward, and these young adults postponed child-bearing. As a result of this trend, some demographers estimated that if the young

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; David Clayman and Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editors.
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Jewish women of the 1970s and 1980s were going to complete child-bearing by the same age as their mothers in the 1940s and 1950s, then the eventual completed family size would fall beneath replacement levels. During this period, divorce rates also leapt upward, especially among those marrying young. The rate for Jewish couples climbed commensurately, although it remained about half the general American rate. Finally, according to best estimates, Jewish intermarriage rates rose sharply in the 1960s and have levelled off at about 25 percent since then.

For Jews, these rapid demographic changes resulted in the increase of all sorts of non-conventional families, which have long been on the periphery of organized Jewish life. These include the singles, childless, intermarried and divorced, (referred to as SCIDS), as well as, most recently, the homosexuals.

Finally, added to these five types of under-involved Jews is another group that bears receiving more attention — the growing population of healthy American Jewish seniors. With the technological advances in health care, many Americans, including Jews, are living longer and spending more of their retirement years in relatively good health. They represent a huge and significantly growing resource which the Jewish community has failed to recruit and utilize to anywhere near its full potential.

The Growing Remoteness of the Unconventional

The growth of these six groups constitutes a challenge to the communal infrastructure. The problem is not only that these groups are increasing in numbers, but that some of them — particularly the singles, childless and divorced — are even less active in conventional Jewish pursuits than were their predecessors before the 1960s. The reasons for their estrangement vary, but chief among them is that by the mid-1970s, these groups were no longer viewed as passing phenomena. Since they were no longer considered socially deviant or uncommon, these non-conventional Jews could construct a social life among themselves outside the organized, conventional Jewish community.

Evidence of the importance of the rise in alternative family types was presented in my recent comparative analysis of the 1965 and 1975

Boston Jewish community studies. During those ten years, most of the decline in Jewish activity in Boston could be ascribed to two factors: 1) the rise in alternative households; and 2) their greater remoteness from Jewish life as compared with conventional families. In contrast with alternative households, the conventionals had maintained fairly high levels of Jewish private and public involvement over the ten year period.

In my forthcoming analysis of the Greater New York Jewish Population Study, the findings indicate that childless young adults, and particularly the never-married, affiliate with Jewish institutions far less frequently than their elders. However, young people who have had school-age children are as active in Jewish life as are their elders in conventional families.

The under-involvement of certain population groups is the consequence of the concentration of extensive Jewish involvement among particular demographic configurations. Communally active Jews typically share several social characteristics. First, because of the high financial cost of Jewish participation, they are relatively affluent. Second, owing to the tendency of all Americans to drop out of churches and other voluntary organizations when they move, the activist Jews in any community are those who have lived there three or more years. Third, and perhaps most important, active Jews (like active Christians) are married and have or have had school-age children. Four, beyond all these individual characteristics, those living in long-established and stable intermediate size Jewish communities in the Northeast quadrant of the United States are also among the most communally active. Those who depart from this model in any way are simply unlikely to be involved in Jewish life.

Some leaders and institutions have responded to the rise of SCIDS and other under-involved Jewish population groups by trying to turn back the demographic clock. They advocated efforts to convince Jews to marry sooner, marry each other, stay married, have children and buy homes in long-standing Jewish neighborhoods. These efforts have considerable moral merit, but — given the limits of voluntary agencies in our society and the sheer dimensions of the alternative population — they can have only marginal impact on the non-conventionals and no

effect on the number of well-elderly. Therefore, the response to the under-involvement of these groups will need to take another form.

Enhancing Commitment by Building Community

As another policy alternative, some leaders speak of the need to raise the Jewish commitment of the under-involved. This policy implicitly contends that low levels of Jewish activity derive from some lack of Jewish motivation or some sort of apathy to things Jewish. In my opinion, the lack of Jewish involvement on the part of the under-involved Jewish population groups is primarily one of connectedness and not of commitment. By connectedness, I am speaking of the extent of social ties with Jewishly activated social circles, and the fact that Jewish involvement at home and in the organized community does vary greatly by social class, family life style, residence and so forth. If so, then the problem of recruiting the under-involved is not entirely, or even primarily, one of inadequate Jewish commitment or motivation. By and large, I have found that most Jews want to be Jewish. When they find themselves in the "right" financial, family and residential circumstances, they do indeed opt for Jewish affiliation.

A good example is the New York City area, where Jewish activity is high and extends over a large area of both inner city and suburbs. Fully 87 percent of parents of school-age children, age 35-49, either affiliate with something Jewish, or keep some semblance of kashrut in their home and Sabbath observance, or both. It should be noted that New York's affiliation rates are somewhat below the national average.

Jewish leaders face the task of extending Jewish networks to those who deviate from the ideal demographic profile of the active Jew outlined here. Even those who continue to insist that lack of commitment is the source of under-involvement, ought to understand that the route to commitment lies through connections and community. Only after improving their social ties, both to one another and to active Jews with similar demographic configurations can we hope to affect their ideology and commitment. In this regard, there is something we can learn from a recent sociological study of Moonie cult members in which the authors conclude that acceptance of the ideology and the decision to become full-time cultists often came only after a long period of

day-to-day interaction with cult members. Rather than being drawn to the group because of the appeal of its ideology, people were drawn to the ideology because of their ties to the group - "final conversion was coming to accept the opinions of ones friends."¹

As the sociologists in the same study point out, there is something to be learned from the Mormons, a group which has been extremely successful in recruiting new members. A Mormon guide to recruitment lays out a 13 stage process for its lay members to follow. The first involves selecting the right prospect for conversion, such as someone who has recently moved into the neighborhood and needs help and friendship. The church member offers to help in some way and begins to slowly establish and nurture a friendship. Eventually this person exposes that s/he is a Mormon. Next the Mormon provides the prospect with literature dealing with non-religious topics such as how to stop smoking. Then the prospects are invited to the Mormon home to observe a family meeting where religion and doctrine are still very much downplayed. Soon the prospects are invited to a Sunday service which is far from the most intense religious experience. In time the prospects are engaged in more weighty religious discussions. Last, they are invited to meet with full-time missionaries at the Mormon neighbors' home. At this point about half the prospects who reached this stage are eventually converted to Mormonism.

Jewish Success Stories: Community, Commitment and Openness

The American Jewish community certainly need not look to the Moonies or the Mormons for models of successful community building. We can learn as much, if not more, from the most notable achievements in Jewish community building in our own day.

Rabbi Harold Schulweiss, for example, built a highly regarded Conservative synagogue community consisting in part of dozens of *havurot* in Encino, California. Rabbi Schulweiss advocates attending to the private agenda of Jews before expecting them to join in the collective public agenda. This means the human needs of the various groups of under-involved Jews need to be addressed before they can be expected to join in collective Jewish communal endeavors.

Another example of successful Jewish

community-building is Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, who built a vibrant modern Orthodox synagogue community on New York's Upper West Side. He says that the key to his success was providing a warm community for hundreds of formerly alienated young people in the affluent, cosmopolitan world of New York. He made sure that everyone, regardless of background, was welcomed to his synagogue and that every newcomer was invited to a Shabbat meal, so that no one would have to make Shabbat alone.

There is also much we can learn from the UJA Young Leadership Cabinet, Israel missions and Camp Ramah. All these institutions are characterized by an inner core of very committed leaders, a genuine openness to new recruits and close attention to nurturing relations among newcomers, as well as between newcomers and veteran members of these communities.

The Pitfall of Dogmatic Pluralism

All of these communities were built around people sharing common demographic, cultural and, what market researchers call, psychographic profiles. One problem with our efforts at Jewish community building is that we try to build community for everybody at once, rather than many communities for many sorts of people, which is certainly the modern trend. For example, many cable TV operators have abandoned broadcasting for the pursuit of narrowcasting, aiming programs at small, but passionate audiences. Thousands of hobby and trade magazines catering to very small numbers of loyal subscribers are among the most successful commercial ventures in America. Thus, a Sunday morning Bible class for everyone will attract far fewer participants than a Bible class for golfers or Talmud class for tennis players.

This illustrates that in order to activate networks and identities for Jewish purposes, the Jewish community needs to draw upon the pre-existing informal social networks among Jews and upon their occupational and leisure-time identities. Neither controlled exclusivity nor limited conflict among our communities and networks should be feared.

Jewish federations are especially prone to fall into the trap of "dogmatic pluralism." Somehow they find it hard to abide, let alone support, sectarian communities. Too often, federations demand that the programs and

institutions they fund cater to all possible participants or that these institutions portray themselves as part of the larger Federation community. This seemingly innocuous request sometimes has the effect of curtailing the effectiveness of off-beat Jewish networks in reaching out, in their own way, to their potential constituencies.

The Competence Barrier

The need for truly welcoming newcomers derives from the special barriers which inhibit the involvement of some Jews in the organized community. Not only for the reasons already discussed, but because many experience a "competence barrier."

Jews like to feel competent. But, for many, certain aspects of Jewish life demand skills which they have never had the opportunity to learn. It is no surprise that the American Jewish community has succeeded enormously in the three areas where many of its members have considerable competence — philanthropy, social service and politics. It is also no surprise that the American Jewish spiritual, religious and perhaps even cultural record is far less exemplary when contrasted with the historical Jewish experience in other times and places.

Clearly, opportunities to learn the conventional Judaic skills need to be extended to wider numbers of people, and this should be done in ways which defuse rather than augment people's sense of incompetence. In addition to improving the offerings in conventional Jewish education, the skills most often taught should be re-evaluated. Most adult Jewish education today has been undertaken by synagogues under rabbinical leadership, and therefore, most programs are oriented towards synagogue Judaism, be it Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist or Havurah. As is commonly known, the synagogue sphere constitutes only one portion of the lives of American Jews; in fact, the so-called "religious" sphere may not be the area where contemporary American Jews especially excel.

The Sages conceived of the Jewish experience as a partnership of three elements: God, Torah and Israel (the Jewish people). Most American Jews deny none of these elements, but they tend to emphasize one or the other. My sense is that most — but certainly not all — view the

Jewish people as the central component of their Jewish identity. In contrast, much of the available Jewish education is conceived of and taught by those who place God at the center of their conceptualization of what it means to be a Jew. This disjuncture means that conventional Jewish education fails to directly address the most immediate passions and interests of American Jews.

If this analysis is correct, then there is a need to supplement the current offerings. Perhaps a type of Jewish education should be formulated which will elevate, dignify, shape and lend meaning to the Jewish lives of the thousands of Jews whose principal Jewish pursuits lie in the areas of philanthropy, politics and social service. If so, then the very conceptualization of what constitutes Jewish knowledge and of what constitutes a Jewish text may need to be dramatically expanded.

From Language of Reproach to Language of Resource

Yet another barrier to involvement arises from the ways in which active Jews speak of those who are less involved; they have a tendency to sharply divide the world into two. Rather than conceiving of Jewish involvement as a variegated mosaic, or at least as a multi-tiered ladder, they tend to speak of the affiliated and the unaffiliated, the observant and the non-observant, the committed and the apathetic. To the ears of the under-involved, these terms chastise and reproach. They arrogate a sense of self-righteousness and privilege to the speaker, be he or she a rabbi, synagogue president, federation leader or even a Jewish studies professor.

This type of language makes the listener feel as if he or she is being called a "bad Jew," and it disregards the statistics concerning Jewish identity. To illustrate, most Jews married to non-converted Gentiles celebrate Passover and Chanukah in some fashion. Three quarters of the Jewish women in such marriages and a third of the Jewish men say they are raising Jewish children. It stands to reason that the vast majority of even the mixed marrieds do not regard themselves as having rejected their Jewish roots and Jewish ties, but it also stands to reason that many are very sensitive to being labelled as such by official Jewry.

The language of reproach, therefore, needs to be modified and replaced, if only sometimes, with the language of resource. A language of resource presents Jewish life as not only a set of obligations, but also as a collection of resources which can benefit their users. Involvement in Jewish life provides people with many sorely needed benefits, such as a sense of belonging to a warm community in the midst of a frequently alienating and isolating society and a sense of transcendent meaning and location in history for the many who feel bereft of this significance. Not least of all, it can mean an opportunity to engage in altruistic activity, to feel useful, helpful and important to others in need.

Entry Points: The Calendar, the Family and Historical Events

Clearly, the case must be made for the benefits of Jewish involvement; however, it is important to decide when it is best to make that case. Efforts at community-building, at addressing people's private agendas and at promoting the public agenda, can be more effective at some times than at others. At certain seasons or moments, some Jews are most open to communal intervention. At these times, they may actually seek, or at least be open to receiving, some sort of advice or assistance from a Jewish expert or institution. These special times are called "Entry Points" and may be associated with the calendar, or the family life style or major historical events as they unfold.

Examples of calendrical entry points include the three widely observed holidays of Passover, Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur and Chanukah. Other entry points may be found during leisure periods, be they weekends or vacation times. The positive reports of educators and others involved with summer camps, Israel missions and weekend retreats testify to greater potential impact when programs are planned for and during leisure periods. In other words, it should be remembered that the worlds of love and work are the two areas where people make their biggest emotional and time commitments. Activities should be planned so they comport with rather than conflict with the rhythm and tempo of family life and work life.

The second sort of entry points are those connected with the family life cycle, include marriage; the birth of a child; moving to a new

community; child-rearing transitions such as beginning school, bar/bat mitzvah and confirmation; death and mourning; illness; and even divorce. These are times when people throughout the West typically look to religious communities, institutions and experts for guidance, instruction and solace. Intervention at these times can leave lasting impressions and make important life-long shifts in Jewish involvement.

Finally, there are entry points provided by the course of historical events. The most notable examples include the wars in Israel. Each such war — in 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973 and 1982 — provided a potent stimulus for American Jewish involvement. All except the last resulted in significantly larger donations to the UJA and Israel Bonds. All, particularly the last three, provoked considerable soul-searching and re-evaluation on the part of large numbers of American Jews. Other examples, perhaps less potent but nevertheless noteworthy, are the quadrennial presidential election seasons when Jews engage in intense debates over Jewish political interests and their responsibilities as Americans. These are also times when Jews are keenly sensitive to seemingly anti-Semitic or anti-Israel statements by public figures.

Fundraisers and community relations specialists have long recognized these periods as times for maximal effort, as fleeting opportunities to be exploited. Their example ought also to be emulated by community-builders, who should capitalize on both the scheduled and the unanticipated historical events which heighten Jewish consciousness and public debate.

¹Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, "Networks of Faith: Interpersonal Bonds and Recruitment to Cults and Sects," *American Journal of Sociology*, 35 May 1980: 1376-95.

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*Dr. Steven M. Cohen is an Associate of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. He is a professor in the Department of Sociology, Queens College, CUNY, and is author of **American Modernity and Jewish Identity**.*