

**The Dawning of a New Day: A Call for a National Consultation  
On the American Jewish Future**  
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We are living in one of the most transformative moments in history, resulting in the reshaping of the human condition, where the global enterprise is undergoing a major technology and communications revolution, the reconfiguration of political power, the creation of a world economic order, and a significant generational shift in cultural attitudes and social behaviors and norms.

For a small community these changes are immensely significant. For American Jewry, “community” has represented the centerpiece of its religious, cultural and social expression. During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, building an effective communal structure and promoting Jewish social capital represented core achievements that served to define and lend credibility and standing to American Jewry. In broader civic terms containing anti-Semitism, while at the same time growing Jewish influence and establishing religious credibility, were prerequisites for building and sustaining national influence and preserving internal traditional ideas and values.

As we conclude the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century a new set of social realities seems at hand. The nature and depth of these changes are extraordinary and will have profound implications on the re-ordering of our social structures and political responses:

1. The globalization of the economy, resulting in the greatest transfer of wealth and resources in history
2. The emergence of new centers of political and military power that will increasingly compete with the United States in international affairs and seek to undermine Western interests and priorities
3. The continued growth of international terrorism and regional violence
4. The reordering of the American economy as a result of both the current crisis and the longer-term economic forces that contribute to the reshaping of the financial status of the United States
5. The emergence of major demographic shifts within this nation, with the significant growth of new ethnic and racial populations who over time will reshape the American social landscape.

One senses in particular that the social fiber of this nation is itself changing. Frank Luntz, writes about what he terms “the angry, fearful American”. He notes that 72% are describing themselves as “mad as hell” with 57% believing that “their children will inherit a worse America than they did...”<sup>1</sup> Such data is not only a reminder of the general unease that exists within this society but should be an early warning signal to American Jewry of the potential for increased inter-group tension and the corresponding rise in anti-Semitic attitudes. The larger social and cultural tsunami that seems apparent will require institutions and communities to re-assess how they are perceived, and what

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Luntz, “The Angry, Fearful American”, Los Angeles Times, Op-Ed, September 27, 2009

steps they must take to remain relevant and engaged, not only with their core constituencies but within the broader society.

### **Implications for the Jewish Community:**

The very concept of community as we had come to understand and define it is now being challenged. The collective expressions that shaped and inspired Jewish life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have given way to new social norms, where the idea of the sovereign-self, institutional protectionism and competition have replaced the focus on shared interests and common goals. A new level of uneasiness now dominates the Jewish landscape.

On the broader global scene several major challenges are apparent: the external threats to Israel and to Jewish security worldwide involve Iranian nuclear and military ambitions, the growth of international terrorism, the re-emergence of European anti-Semitism, and a growing focus on anti-Israel activism across the globe.

On the domestic side, a number of factors are contributing to the remaking of the American Jewry. As a result of the current economic climate, Jewish institutions are experiencing significant fiscal and operational challenges, leading in some cases to major restructuring of primary programs and services and in other settings, the actual closing of organizations. In addition, the high rates of assimilation and intermarriage along with the changing generational affiliation and identity patterns will result in a fundamentally different ethnic and demographic composite of Jews within this society. This can best be reflected in the demographic issues facing Jewish Americans, as portrayed by lower participation and membership rates, a significantly aging population, and a growing cultural and religious disconnect between younger Jews and prior generations.

Critics of the American Jewish scene while acknowledging the creativity and growth among some sectors of Jewish life, bemoan the failure of the center-piece of the communal and religious world to demonstrate the same type of innovation and structural dynamism. To the contrary, as the creative Jewish edge pursues its particularistic interests, the core seems to be imploding as downsizing and institutional malaise reflects the storyline of some of our most potent organizational systems.

In the context of an emerging 21<sup>st</sup> model, Jewish life will be governed and framed around several core principles:

1. Old notions of institutional turf no longer apply; no one owns “the” Jewish response to our communal future.
2. As a result of the rapidly changing picture of who American Jews are and what they represent, there will need to emerge a different Jewish marketplace; such an environment must be seen as transparent and committed to experimentation and innovation.
3. The competition for financial resources will require the community to revisit both its fundraising messages and its inventory of financial resource development tools.

Jack Wertheimer challenges us to think and to be governed by a different paradigm, when he writes:

“... we would do well to see it as an opportunity to ask ourselves some tough questions about the best ways to build Jewish social capital and draw in disengaged Jews – as a chance to converse about what we expect ourselves and our fellow Jews to contribute to Jewish life.”<sup>2</sup> Wertheimer is not alone in noting these “tough questions” as many others have been writing about the evolving demographic and social issues facing Jewish life. Some commentators note with proper concern a growing body of evidence of the decline of Jewish influence within this nation. “Jewish political influence presupposes a critical mass of Jews interested in leading a creative Jewish life. Fewer Jews concerned with Judaism means a weakened Jewish people.”<sup>3</sup>

“Community” must be understood as an organic structure, where the interplay among its core elements has profound implications for the overall welfare of the enterprise. The success of the American Jewish experience was the ability of the community over its long tenure to rapidly and systematically adjust to both internal and external currents of opportunities and threats. American Jewry has thrived in this society as a result of its ability to gain political credibility and recognition. The community’s access to key elites was directly tied to its holding a shared communal and religious agenda. In this new moment in time, the communal system will be tested.

### **Convening a National Consultation on the American Jewish Future:**

Throughout Jewish history at moments of great social upheaval and religious transitions, Jews would communicate with their co-religionists in order to redefine their status. Community leaders would come together to assess their political and religious status and define ways in which the communal enterprise ought to engage the larger civic society as well as address internal priorities.

American Jewry has not convened such a gathering since the 1943 American Jewish Conference which mobilized the community to advocate for a Jewish state in Palestine. Earlier gatherings, for example, led to the creation of the Reform Movement in the 1870’s and fostered the mobilization of an American Jewish response following the end of the First World War. As in the past, some institutional leaders elected not to participate in such discussions, fearing the loss of their identity, arguing against the notion that anyone group or combination of organizational voices might speak for or represent American Jewry. Yet, regularly throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, significant numbers of American Jewish institutions did convene to tackle major shared international concerns, whether related for example to Israel or Soviet Jewry.

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<sup>2</sup> Jack Wertheimer, “Time for Straight-Talk about Assimilation” Sept. 24<sup>th</sup>, 2009 E-Jewish Philanthropy.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Bayme, “American Jewry’s Future as Seen Fifty Years Ago and Now,” No. 49, 15<sup>th</sup> of October, 2009, Changing Jewish Communities, Institute for Global Jewish Affairs, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.

While these prior convocations were directed toward specific outcomes, this national conversation must address the myriad of challenges now confronting American Judaism and its communal network of institutions and services. Such a dialogue can lead to the re-imagination of American Judaism and a serious conversation on the future of the Jewish communal system of governance, leadership, and financial viability.

While no institutional body has the authority to legislate social or structural change, a thoughtful and essential summit of Jewish leadership would seem to be both appropriate and necessary. Participation and engagement must be seen as a responsibility that transcends institutional boundaries, ideological and religious positions, and political passions. The federation system and synagogue umbrella structures must join national agencies in convening such a Jewish dialogue.

Similar convocations should also be convened within our local communities, allowing leaders to re-imagine ways in which institutions might work in collaboration, while identifying unmet needs, shared concerns, and common action. Both on the national scene, and within our local settings, such conversations can lead to the re-imagination of American Judaism and the Jewish communal system of governance, leadership, and financial planning and collaboration.

Such gatherings are far more common among other faith traditions and have resulted in an array of creative and transformative outcomes for these religious communities. Such a national conversation is long overdue among American Jewish leaders, as it would come at a time where the communal enterprise seems unclear with regard to its mandate as well as deeply divided along political and ideological lines. In some measure one finds at this time communal and religious leadership bereft of ideas and strategies on how best to reach significant pockets of Jews who are unaffiliated or disconnected from the organized structures of Jewish life and in mobilizing initiatives to embrace younger Jews. Re-imagining Israel in the American Jewish context must be seen as core to this agenda.

For such a national dialogue to be successful, institutional leaders must step away from historical organizational rivalries, personal ego trips, and set operational assumptions. The focus for such discussions must be on finding common ground and a renewed sense of communal purpose.

Attention must also be given to a series of follow-up conversations. One such subject area ought to be a special consultation with Israel and the world's major Jewish communities on the state of world Jewry. If a conversation needs to be held about the status of American Jewry then this second convocation should be convened to address the threatening international challenges facing the Jewish people and more directly, the Jewish State. With multiple voices expressing themselves on issues related to Diaspora-Israel matters, such a gathering would allow for the articulation of shared values, common principles of action, and the implementation of specific action-points.

Similarly, a specific conference on Jewish leadership would need to be considered. It is the creative and effective art of leading that in the end will be the essential ingredient to sustain and advance communities and to help implement the visionary principles and programs that would hopefully emerge from these national and local convocations. How do we intend to prepare our professional leadership cadre, rabbis, educators and communal activists for the future of American Jewry? Similarly, what steps are we willing to take as a community to also “invest” in building a new generation of lay leaders? The question of leadership represents a crucial and essential institutional challenge and may ultimately define the success and viability of 21<sup>st</sup> Judaism. American Jewry does not have the luxury of assuming that leaders will simply emerge rather it ought to be a communal imperative to identify the types of leadership challenges that will likely confront this new generation of leaders, as gifted leaders will be asked to manage and direct highly complex organizations through volatile and uncertain times.

Correspondingly, *a dialogue on media and technology* would appear to be in order if the communal enterprise is to fully embrace and effectively apply 21<sup>st</sup> resources and options. Just as the business sector and other faith communities regularly assesses their branding and market share, the Jewish community must design a national public relations strategy, promoting core themes.

*Establishing a think tank on behalf of American Jewry* would seem to be one of several possible outcomes, just as American business is currently examining consumer trends and new product lines, while also engaging in the investment of new ways of producing goods and services, so must non-profit institutions re-evaluate their effectiveness and redefine ways in which they deliver core services. For example, the Jewish community can no longer afford to operate without such a national *resource and development bank* designed to study trends and measure outcomes and invest in new models of delivery of service. The complexity of the issues requires today such a commitment to planning and strategizing.

There are few occasions in history when a community has the opportunity to shape and define its future; this may be one of those transformational moments for American Jewry. The failure to understand the depth of these social changes could be singularly devastating to the viability and future of the American Jewish enterprise.

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An [\*abbreviated version\*](#) of this article, prepared by Dr. Windmueller, is available on our Website.