

"Wholeness and Wholesomeness"

by
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I begin from a very simple, holistic premise. Jewish identity is a constellation of values that are linked and integrated with each other, that defy attempts at subdivision or isolation, and that are expressed in both attitude and behavior. It is based on a vision of personal responsibility to God and His creatures, to an on-going commitment to study and to moral self-improvement, and to an interrelationship of all Jews in an over-arching community. The point is not original. It is but a restatement of the well-known proposition by Shimon the Righteous in *Pirkei Avot* regarding the props upon which the world stands.

I believe that to wrest one set of values from the others, as if each did not require the reinforcement and sustenance that the others provide, is an enterprise doomed to failure. It is akin to the surgical separation of the organs of a body; it is meaningful only if performed on a corpse, for otherwise, it will kill a living organism. It is this premise that informs my view of all the issues being confronted in this volume.

Consider, as an example, the relationship between Israel and American Jewry. I take no great risk in stating unequivocally that Israel remains a central issue for every concerned Jew, affiliated or not. However, as the direct threat to Israel's physical survival has apparently receded, and as we move away from her founding generation, the difficulties and contradictions of her domestic social and political condition emerge. Israelis cannot agree about the role of religion in their lives, the legal definitions of personal status, and the implementation of a human rights policy—let alone diplomatic negotiations and peace initiatives. Why be surprised at the lack of unanimity among her American supporters? Under these conditions, short of direct military attack, the cogency of traditional appeals for resources and political support begin to fade seriously.

Now, this reflects a more important phenomenon: the not-very-gradual decrease in support and concern for Israel among American Jews generally. From concrete indicators, such as visiting or maintaining personal linkages to more abstract feelings of "attachment" and

"support," national and local Jewish population surveys reveal that the numbers expressing an affirmative relation to Israel are appallingly low. But there is one notable exception, and it is consistent with my hypothesis: Study after study show that those exhibiting most characteristics of commitment to the Jewish tradition also evince the strongest support for Israel, by whatever measure.

Though usually labeled "secular," support for Israel is part of the value-complex of which I speak. Appeals neglecting such linkage will be short-lived, and the support they engender will prove superficial at best. On both sides of the ocean, those whose primary concern is political, social, and economic support for Israel would do well to study--with an open mind, free of ideological and institutional prejudice and with the courage to challenge the inherited wisdom that has heretofore informed their approach to Jewish communal life--that which defines the character of life and drives the engine of communal progress in American Jewry.

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Much the same may be said about Jewish philanthropy. The data so copiously and fastidiously gathered by national and local Federations over the past decade appear to provide a well-defined pattern. Those exhibiting the clearest links to core Jewish values, i.e., observance of *mitzvot*, study of Jewish texts, and a sense of belonging to the Jewish people, are also the most likely to give and give more to Jewish causes, notwithstanding the draconian financial burdens of living an observant Jewish life in the United States. Giving is an inherent part of their world-view and grows organically out of their *Weltanschauung*. This is more than a tactical salvo in the battle for Jewish survival; it is the very fulfillment of what they consider their Jewish mission.

Therefore, thoughts about an institutional restructure of the Jewish community and the role Federations may play in any such attempt, are mooted by a larger reality. Absent a clear-cut allegiance to central and integrated Jewish norms, there will be little to fuel these institutions and few who will care. Appeals that ignore this reality in favor of organizational tinkering, will end up by "continuing" policies which have led to the erosion of Jewish "identity" in the first place.

The horizontal and generational expansion of observance, study, and belonging are investments in the survival of institutional Jewish life. They should be asserted by these institutions through outreach to the unaffiliated and the indifferent who are at the margins and have not (yet) made a complete break with their Jewishness. But they must also be confirmed-in word, deed, and dollar--through support for those who already model this behavior. To neglect the plight of those within the Jewish fraternity heart and soul, while investing only in those on the rim or outside the community, is to invite double disaster: losing confirmed Jews and not attracting the alienated.

Finally, we must reassess the extent of our tolerance for diversity--surely a bold undertaking which violates every norm in the contemporary cannon of "political correctness" in today's Jewish community. It is almost a cliché to note that it has always been characteristic of the Jewish tradition to protect the minority position, to preserve it in text for its inherent wisdom and for its later reapplication. However, tradition also values the integrity to make intelligent judgments and the courage to discriminate between available paths before us. Not every deviation must be accepted, nor every nuance legitimated, not every ideology or alternative lifestyle welcomed. (It is wise to bear in mind the quote attributed to the late Professor Lionel Trilling that "some people are so open-minded that their brains fall out.")

If Federation leadership is to help stop the massive disintegration of Jewish life and of the Jewish community, it must have the courage to make choices, to establish priorities, to change directions--and not to be intimidated by the very thought of making some people unhappy. It should feel called upon to reject those policies that threaten, whether overtly or indirectly, the integrity and vitality of this constellation that, in my opinion, constitute the very fabric of Jewish life.

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The health of the Jewish community is best assured by a new dedication to the integrity of the Jewish tradition which, to paraphrase G.K. Chesterton, has not been tried and found wanting;

it has not been tried and hence it has not been wanted. Without the wholeness of Judaism, there will be no wholesomeness in the Jewish community. Unless we begin being Jewish, we will stop being Jews--it is as starkly simple as all that.

One thing is sure: we cannot do "business as usual," and we cannot continue in the same direction we have followed in the past. Before sounding the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah, the Hasidic master, Rabbi Haim Halberstram of Sanz, told a parable first introduced by the Hasidic Zaddik of Liske. A man was lost in the forest and about to despair of ever finding a way to safety when he met another traveler. "How do I get out?," he asked. The other replied, "I cannot tell you which road will lead you out of the forest and to the security of your home. But this I can tell you: do not take the road I have taken, because it leads nowhere."

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