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A NEW AGENDA FOR THE JEWISH PEOPLE

Daniel J. Elazar and Manfred Gerstenfeld

The Multiplication of Challenges / Developing New Frameworks / Who are Judaism's Competitors? / The Pragmatic Problem / From Department Store to Shopping Mall / Major Avenues of Jewish Identification / Living in an Ethnic Context / The European Jewish Condition / Syncretism / Multi-culturalism / The End of an Exclusively Jewish Public Square / Openness Everywhere / What Should Jewish Leaders Do? / The Need for Analysis / Pragmatic Approaches / More Specific Problems / The Holocaust Assets Issue / The Need for a Cutting-Edge Analytical Capability

The twentieth century saw the extraordinary emergence of the Jewish people from one of its greatest catastrophes. While the Holocaust is generally considered one of the key events to understanding world history in the past one hundred years, the same is true - though it is hardly recognized as such - of the Jewish people's finding ways to bounce back. The challenges of modernity have been exceptionally cruel. Judaism has emerged from them both damaged and strengthened.

The Jewish people has overcome its homelessness and persecution. It has kept its human face like no other people while confronting an endless line of extreme hostility ranging from prolonged attempts at extermination to innovative terrorism. It has made more efforts than any other nation to rescue its members from distress in many countries. It has become a voice on the world scene, with its own identity. The past century thus saw the Jewish people go from one extreme to another.

The Multiplication of Challenges

For well over a century the Jewish public agenda was clear. We were engaged in a revolution against our debilitated status in the ghettos and the Pale of Settlement, one that sought to

revitalize Jewish life in modern terms. This involved the massive resettlement of Jews beyond the Old World locations of the previous millennium to such New World locations as Israel and North America. We sought to rescue Jews at risk and to reconstitute our communities under these new conditions. By and large we met with success. Today only remnants of that old agenda remain and success in dealing with it has also led to new challenges.

In the meantime, general events in the outside world and changes specifically concerning the Jewish people make the definition of a new agenda a necessity. Although these new challenges are fragmented, they are increasing in number and difficult to identify.

Nowadays the priorities on the Jewish agenda may still be definable, but the methods for realizing them are becoming less known with time. In the past, external challenges were usually major but few. They began thousands of years ago when confronting multi-faced paganism. Once that disappeared, conversion to Christianity and, to a lesser extent, Islam became a threat.

Besides conversion, assimilation without converting also started to affect the Jewish people in the nineteenth century. Many Jews related to Judaism as a religion only. Despite this, as time passed, Zionism, Hebrew culture, and Jewish ethnicity gradually became dominant. They brought about the establishment of the State of Israel, which increasingly has become the major center of Jewish civilization.

In the twentieth century, totalitarian ideologies created new threats to Jewish survival. Nazism practiced the physical extermination of Jews; communism aimed at their religious extinction.

Once these problems were overcome, a new series of assimilatory options emerged to which Judaism lost individuals. Eastern religions, cults of various types, and radical splinter movements had an above-average attraction for Jewish youngsters searching for something which required total commitment. Thus, the movements competing with Judaism started to multiply, a process of challenges which has continued to increase.

Developing New Frameworks

Earlier in the century Jewish reactions to outside threats had been communal and traditional, expressed in the Zionist movement and the revival of Hebrew culture. Reactions to the new postwar threats were, however, confined to the private and personal sphere.

Those who addressed them acted on a smaller and sometimes even individual scale. The new frameworks which developed within Judaism - either formal or very loose ones - attempted to meet some of the hidden needs of those in search of spirituality and/or ideological commitment. They often used new marketing methods as practiced in general society.

The flowering of the Habad movement, whose adherents were directed by a leader with a strong personality, the late Rabbi Schneerson, is the prototype of a formal organization. Its followers would not undertake any major step in their lives, such as marrying or moving elsewhere, without the express blessing of their leader. Many outsiders came to this movement, which made it very clear, however, what its integrity was, and that it would not compromise.

The late Shlomo Carlebach was an example of the loose form of outreach. Traveling around, he attracted drop-outs from Judaism. While his behavior might have been offensive within the Orthodox community to which he belonged, his teachings were not. He created a new type of spirituality in Orthodox Judaism which has continued after his death.

At the other end of the spectrum there is the Jewish Renewal movement with figures such as Arthur Waskow and Zalman Shachter-Shalomi. Being in tune with the New Age movement, they proclaim that both people and Judaism must move toward renewal. Waskow, for instance, promotes merging ecological considerations with *kashrut*, creating a new concept: “eco-*kashrut*.”

Who are Judaism’s Competitors?

The external challenges to Judaism by various small movements were still identifiable and definable. World Jewry attempted to deal with the issues on two tracks: intellectually, through a serious concern with adapting Judaism to modernity; and sociologically, with the preservation of Jewish identity or Jewishness either with or without a religious connection.

More recently, however, the significant manifestations of being Jewish as well as Jewish identity have collapsed, both with those who have sought to find new expressions for Judaism, and those who have lost their interest in Judaism and religion, and are interested primarily in what they consider Jewishness in civil society. As more opportunities for Jews’ participation in general society emerged, some Jews transposed what were previously considered Jewish values to general themes.

In today’s society - and probably even more so in tomorrow’s - one is no longer sure what is competing with Judaism. On the one hand, its challenges derive from a rather amorphous general environment, characterized simultaneously by increasing globalization and strengthened individualism.

The issue is no longer competition only from religion, ideology, or spiritual movements for the souls and hearts of Jews. Today, part of the struggle is for their time: there are almost unlimited special interests available, ranging from sports to collecting. Judaism is thus competing for the slowly-increasing free time of the Jew with rapidly increasing numbers of alternative uses of that time.

On the other hand, specific new threats to Judaism are on the horizon, deriving from developments within the Jewish community such as the internal conflicts in Israeli society or the unforeseeable consequences of the Jewish World War II claims issue.

The Pragmatic Problem

General society has given up trying to find a better term than “post-modern” for what is occurring. This expression indicates that the best way of defining the present is not in a single identifiable characteristic, but rather in saying that it is different from its predecessor, modernism. Understanding this background is a necessity for Jewish leaders trying to cope with a changing environment.

Contemporary Jewish leadership does not have a definition problem so much as a serious pragmatic one: it needs to confront the challenge of a large number of Jews drifting away from the Jewish people. The 1990 population survey clearly demonstrated this with respect to the American Jewish community. The war claims issue demonstrates it with respect to European Jewish communities.

Even where there is one voice speaking on behalf of organized Jewry, it represents only a small part of those concerned. This is true for both big and small Jewish agglomerations. In The Netherlands, for instance, there is the CJO (Centraal Joods Overleg) to which all major organizations belong. Nonetheless, these bodies together represent only about 20 percent of Jews living in The Netherlands.

How do we get to a new agenda for the Jewish people? This means, inter alia, identifying private interests and turning them into public purposes. In an individualistic society, one must be continuously creative in finding these links and integrating them in the Jewish framework as far as possible.

One of the authors of this study witnessed how the Dalai Lama did this in Florida in April 1999 where a crowd of 4,000 people gathered to participate in a convocation in his honor, with 90 percent looking for his spiritual blessing. He, however, turned the meeting into a rally for a free Tibet without any apparent objections.

Jewish environmental organizations are an example of this. In these, some Jewish leaders are attempting to show those with an interest in the environmental field that the Jewish tradition has been referring to this problem area in a major and specifically Jewish way for thousands of years. Classical Jewish sources provide many references to how Jewish civil society relates to the issue.

From Department Store to Shopping Mall

In the past, Jewish communities were like department stores under single ownership in which the owner decides what was appropriate for sale and what not. Now they will be like shopping malls, offering many choices, some of which may even compete with each other. What characterizes them is that they may even be under one roof but under different management, implying only the most limited kind of approval by the mall owners.

Jewish leaders will have to wrack their brains to find ways of both consolidating what there is and using the new fragmentation to rebuild communities. As in the past, the like-minded will have to come together and covenant with each other to undertake common responsibility. This is nothing but a contemporary configuration of the late-nineteenth century Jewish young men of Philadelphia whose covenant, which they called by its Aramaic designation, the *kayame deshamaye*, led to what became an American Jewish renaissance.

Major Avenues of Jewish Identification

In a confused and fragmented situation, one must first take stock of what major avenues of Jewish identification there are which show promise of growth. Only two sizable ones spring to mind: the first is the State of Israel; the second, in much smaller numbers, is ultra-Orthodoxy.

In 1914, there were 4 million Jews in the United States and 60,000 in what is now Israel. At the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, it held 600,000 Jews while there were an estimated 6 million Jews in the United States. Today, the number of core Jews in the United States has shrunk to 5.4 million, while the number of Jews in Israel is close to 5 million and continues to increase.

This affirms the Zionist concept that the survival of the Jewish people is bound up with Jews living mainly among other Jews. The influx into Israel and the destruction of much of European Jewry in the Holocaust have also radically moved the center of gravity of world Jewry.

Living in an Ethnic Context

In the meantime, the ethnic mode of Jewish living, where Jews without much religious adherence lived abroad and interacted mainly with other Jews, has significantly decreased. The violinist Isaac Stern tells in his autobiography how his father, who was not buried in a Jewish cemetery, lived almost exclusively among Jews in a music subculture. Stern himself is not very religious either, but the friends he mentions in his book are almost exclusively Jews.

Such Jewish milieus also existed in particular professions. Stern himself expressed this poignantly when American-Soviet exchanges of musicians started in the 1950s, saying: “They send us their Jews from Odessa; we send them our Jews from Odessa.” The diamond trade is another such professional Jewish environment. Today, even a kibbutz in Israel, where one meets many non-Jewish volunteers, is less of an ethnically-closed environment. Yiddish and other Jewish spoken languages, another instrument for keeping Jews together, have largely disappeared as well.

Is living among other Jews in as ethnically-closed a context as possible something which will transfer Jewish values of some kind to the next generation? Statistically, it certainly creates the possibility. How true it is for the major Jewish agglomerations abroad is something that Jewish demographers in the United States have quarreled about for more than a decade.

The European Jewish Condition

A special threat exists in Europe. For the first time, Jews on the periphery of Judaism have the feeling that they may be almost universally welcome as Jews in European society, provided they are liberal and secular. Religious and ethnic anti-Semitism, hallmarks of European culture in the past, are no longer politically correct. Those Europeans in need of hating Jews have mainly moved on to the latest stage of anti-Semitism: hatred of the State of Israel.

Many marginal European Jews believe that this welcome in non-Jewish society is conditional on their not demonstrating any obvious particularities. Once they do not, however, they are often asked questions such as “What is it that makes Jews the greatest architects of our times?” “What do Liebeskind, Gehry, and Eisenmann have that non-Jews do not have?” Questions of this type, looking for a common Jewish denominator which - at best - is extremely vague, are more difficult to answer than explaining complex Talmudic passages.

The second significantly growing mode of Judaism - ultra-Orthodoxy - is mainly a path of escapism. By shutting oneself off from the outside world and expressing this even semiotically by one's clothes to any passer-by, one makes it clear, even in the slightest of encounters, that not only does one not belong to the mainstream, but one rejects it. As long as there are enough other Jews on its periphery to protect the ultra-Orthodox, they can continue to increase, due to both new adherents and natural growth resulting from large families.

Syncretism

Not belonging to either of the two growing modes of Judaism, where does that leave Jewish leadership in the remainder of the community? Probably, mainly in confusion. How does one define solutions for passing on Judaism to the next generation when so many things are pulling them away whose common motives are unclear and whose answers are unproven?

Even if one confronts only the threats one knows, one faces great difficulties. To the classic modes of anti-Semitism, new ones such as Internet propaganda have been added. One cannot have 24-hour protection for Jewish institutions. Anti-Semitic terrorist acts have been carried out so often that they have become prototypes. So has the desecration of cemeteries, a simple, almost risk-free act that any anti-Semite can execute.

Syncretism - the fusion of different religious cultures - is another threat. It derives mainly from mixed marriage; in order not to have the *hanukkiyah* compete with the Christmas tree, they have to co-exist in the mixed family. Jews marrying out in the United States often prefer a civil marriage before a Jewish judge. On that occasion, a glass may be broken as a token of the Jewish partner's culture, and a candle lit for the other. Beyond that, Jews like to cultivate the illusion that many Christian symbols in the public square of Western society are essentially those of the general society rather than of another religion.

Multi-culturalism

Syncretism, however, is only one competing narrative of our time among many. Another problem is multi-culturalism. Everybody can rightfully claim to be curious about, interested in, or even participate in the culture of his neighbor or whomever he meets. While keeping one's privacy is politically correct, for religious privacy this is much less so. Jewish culture is no longer something for Jews alone. Now, after many centuries, the Jewish tradition is also being claimed by others. Or, alternatively, to some extent, the non-Jew becomes an honorary Jew.

For instance, Kabbalah has been made as popularly legitimate as possible by Madonna's studying it. The phenomenon of non-Jews being interested in Jewish texts has existed at least since medieval times. Among Renaissance figures, Pico de Mirandola was a well-known example. Seventeenth century political philosophers such as Locke, Harrington, Hobbes, and Sidney either studied Hebrew or read and quoted classical Jewish texts from translation. In those times, however, the interest was limited to some elite figures.

Today, the Jews have hardly any place left which is totally their own. Isaac Stern tells how he and then New York Mayor Robert Wagner jointly participated in a Seder, after which he invited the mayor home for a *halakhically*-forbidden beer, in order to discuss the renovation of Carnegie Hall. Many American nuns wish to participate in a Seder, claiming that Jesus did so in his last supper. Even in Israel, one gets requests from foreign, non-Jewish visitors to participate in the Seder.

Christians flock to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles. One of these authors was told by such visitors that their participation in a dinner in his *succah* was the greatest event of their lives. Cardinals and, last year, the pope have participated in the lighting of the *hanukkiyah*. Some Mormons put scrolls on their doorposts containing texts of the New Testament.

The End of an Exclusively Jewish Public Square

Often even the synagogue is no longer an exclusively Jewish public square. In small communities from Salonika to Tokyo, the non-Jewish visitors in synagogues may, on some days, be a significant part of the crowd. The pope came to meet the Jews in the Rome synagogue a number of years ago, albeit more as a gesture of external relations as no service was held.

Cardinal Law of Boston came to Israel a few weeks ago as part of a program to improve mutual understanding between Catholics and Jews. He went to a Friday night service at the Wailing Wall and to a Shabbat morning service in one of Jerusalem's Conservative synagogues. At least one of his entourage was noted there to be able to follow the service in Hebrew.

In the past, having been rejected by the external world, Jews had an incentive to maintain their own public square. Where is the exclusively Jewish public square now in small communities? One tends to find it only in extraordinary circumstances. A community such as Bangkok, consisting almost exclusively of Jews not born in Thailand, and linguistically and ethnically very different from the surroundings, has difficulty in blending into the culture of the external world.

Multi-culturalism goes back many decades, but was once confined only to limited fields. It concerned not only outsiders with an interest in aspects of Judaism, but also Jews who participated in the culture of others, e.g., the world of jazz, with proponents like George Gershwin and Benny Goodman.

Were Judaism a proselytizing religion, there would be some opportunities for it in today's world. The numbers of those interested in converting, provided there were an active outreach program, could be significant. The conclusion reached from this should be a different one, however: the concept of the Noahide laws should be more actively propagated.

Openness Everywhere

Today, all fields of study are becoming increasingly open. Despite its limited resources, the Jewish people is often expected to participate in this officially. The Vatican is interested in dialogue with the Jewish people and in common positions on matters such as the role of family in society or even the environment. Interfaith dialogue is a Christian need rather than a Jewish one, but quite a few Jewish organizations meet it.

In Europe, this need is fed by the history of the Holocaust during which, many Christians believe, a large number of their leaders failed. It is not confined, however, to the field of religion. In the United States, for instance, a coalition of Christian and Jewish groups has established the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, whose executive director is a Jew.

These examples are only the tip of the iceberg and can be extended by many others. Jewish musicians might work together in increasingly popular klezmer groups, but klezmer music is now of interest as well to non-Jews, and today one also finds non-Jewish groups at klezmer festivals.

The challenges, only a few of which have been listed here, are not necessarily particularly hostile. As said before, provided it is not too fundamentalist, environmentalism can be brought into the Jewish fold through activities organized by Jewish environmentalists.

What Should Jewish Leaders Do?

So what should Jewish leaders do? It is a question which must be answered with regard to content before it can be answered with regard to money. Whatever the nature of the problem, the issue remains how to achieve maximum results - i.e., retain the largest number of Jews for the Jewish people - while making the best use of limited resources.

Some answers have been given by individual American Jewish leaders with major personal financial resources. They intend to offer all Jewish youngsters from the United States at least one short trip to Israel.

We will soon know whether this is a successful method and what other elements have to be added to this package. Will a large crowd of youngsters, many of whom are not searching, find in Israel what they are not specifically looking for?

The Need for Analysis

With relatively limited financial means, perhaps one should indeed first undertake a number of studies assessing what has brought those remote from Judaism closer to it in the recent past. Can one learn something from those who were willing to change their lifestyle radically which can be applied to those who want only to make a moderate change?

In other words, those who came to Habad of their own volition or were picked up at the well-publicized meeting point at the Western Wall were clearly in search of something. So were the smaller numbers of those who found their way to one of the Carlebach communities. Are there any points of relevance in these experiences for less intense commitments to Judaism? Only professional study of the issue will tell.

Can one learn something from the more focused programs which have convinced Jews from abroad to stay in Israel, for instance, the WUJS program in Arad, or that of the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem? Or the strengthening of small communities by the WUJS Arevim program, where committed students help those in the diaspora? These people rely on their enthusiasm and commitment rather than on their professional skills. Can these successful programs be extended? Once again, studying before spending may be a wise use of resources.

Pragmatic Approaches

Indeed, in situations of utter confusion and multiple non-quantifiable factors, it is by defining practical assessment methods that one can understand phenomena better and, hopefully, design more effective approaches.

This methodology is not necessarily limited or even specific to the issues facing the Jewish people. In the fragmented reality of post-modernism, many other interest groups have developed pragmatic approaches based on a variety of methods, the proof of which was given by the fact that they yielded results.

In a field far removed from ours such as multinational corporations coping with increasing environmentalist pressure, a limited number of them organized and started developing programs. In this splintered field, the one which was soon seen to give the most results for the least effort was the publication of case studies from companies which had been particularly successful in specific areas, enabling others to benchmark on them.

Why not do the same and identify the Jewish communities that have had successful programs, and those with particularly successful leaders? What is their success based on? How can it be copied? Spreading well-prepared case-studies around Jewish communities may be a low-cost method with a high return.

More Specific Problems

The need to know better is equally valid for those issues concerning more specific problems deriving from the Jewish reality itself. Why not assess answers to the multiple conflicts in society that the most successful small Israeli groups have developed in this field? Can these be extended on a larger scale? By what methods? What means are required?

The same goes for Israel-diaspora relations, some aspects of which have already been mentioned before. There are others as well. Are there situations for benchmarking the co-habitation of the various denominations in Judaism? Do individuals such as former Finance Minister Ya'akov Ne'eman and ex-Knesset Member Alex Lubotsky have answers on how to reconcile different expressions of Judaism which can work for the Israeli reality? If so, how does one stimulate and propagate them?

The fundamental difference in the religious outlook between Americans and Israelis is understood by very few people indeed. The American Jewish community has been reshaped by the Protestant view of religion as a matter of individual spirituality, in line with the non-Jewish environment which - at least nominally - is a believing society. Religious practice has thus become individualistic as well, traditional practice being modified to better coincide with beliefs.

For most Israelis, any individual may decide what he or she believes or will observe; however, they hardly expect the religious tradition, fixed by Divine law, to accommodate them. They consider the American Jewish denominations as responses to the specific needs of communities in the diaspora. Such needs are almost absent in the Israeli reality.

The reconciliation of belief and practice is not something which particularly preoccupies non-Orthodox Israelis. Egalitarianism in the synagogue is of importance to very few persons. Liturgical reform is even less so. The need for voluntary individual religious choices is almost incomprehensible. In Israel, nationality and religion are intimately connected.

Is there thus any way of combining the American concept of Jewish spirituality and the Israeli one which is based on a *halakhic* edifice and knowledge of texts? The secular Israeli may not keep many commandments in the traditional way, but he still understands that, without knowledge of the classic Jewish texts, one is an ignorant Jew. Should not the few places where the two approaches mix be studied for elements which have broader application?

The Holocaust Assets Issue

This need for a better understanding is particularly true for what may be the most nebulous issue of all as well as being the one matter which may be the most consequential for the funding of Jewish life in the coming decades: the struggle over Jewish war claims. It is almost beyond comprehension that facts which have been largely known for decades suddenly raise worldwide interest.

Here is an example of how federalism, one of the Jerusalem Center's areas of specialization which may not always have been understood by those looking at our work, is of concern to a Jewish policy institute when we see how U.S. state insurance commissions, supported by Jewish allies, take the lead that they have on this issue. On one hand, one talks of globalization, which prevents Jews from maintaining an exclusive public square. On the other hand, it opens up whole new arenas for the Jewish people to express Jewish issues that were not of Jewish concern earlier. U.S. state insurance commissioners have forced onto the national agenda of an inward-looking country crimes committed more than fifty years ago by European countries to Jews who are not American either. A better understanding of the processes at work is necessary to conduct the negotiations more skillfully.

Nobody can forecast all major facets of how the present international confrontation with elements of European society on the stolen Holocaust assets will influence the situation of the Jews throughout the world. There will be material aspects: despite dwindling numbers, many Jewish organizations will have a stronger financial base. The need to negotiate collectively forces Jewish organizations to collaborate with each other for a specific purpose. If that purpose disappears, will the collaboration remain without further consequences?

This issue may also affect Israel's political relations with European countries. How can present European governments pseudo-morally continue to criticize Israel, if not only their predecessors during the war but also postwar governments failed so badly in their behavior toward the Jews?

Even today European governments - the Dutch being one of them - refuse to accept legal and moral responsibility for the misdeeds of their predecessors and populations during the war. It may also lead to increased anti-Semitism, even if that is also affected by post-modern fragmentation.

The Need for a Cutting-Edge Analytical Capability

With regard to the war claims issue, contemporary Jewish history is being shaped before our eyes in a way which is poorly understood, but can be easily documented due to the major media attention it is receiving. The Jewish polity is undergoing changes as a result of this process, and this too can already be assessed in part.

In-depth answers to the key questions posed above cannot yet be given. There may well be other key questions to be answered which have not yet emerged clearly enough. How does one prepare for the unforeseeable? Basically, by having a state of mind which makes one mentally prepared for what is going to happen.

What is thus evident already is that the existence of an organized cutting-edge analytical capability framework is a precondition for the Jewish people to effectively confront its shifting strategic challenges with a new agenda.

The Jews are simultaneously a religion, an ethnic group, a covenantal community, a tribe, and a few other things. There is no way to describe them as only one of these things. The Jews have shifted this identity around as conditions demanded, and this has helped them to maintain their existence over the past 3,500 years.

Jews are losing their exclusive public spaces. At the same time, globalization and the federal arrangements that accompany it are offering new opportunities. As individual Jewish communities and leaders may identify only a few of them, it becomes important to present case-studies on what has succeeded in one place to other communities.

Methodologies and procedures for managing this process will become increasingly central. Conceptually, such abstract observations are not easy to explain to one's audience; for the Jewish leadership, they will become a necessity.

Since the beginning of modernity in the mid-seventeenth century, there have been developments in each century leading to a cycle of acculturation, assimilation, and revival. At first, revivals were primarily private and religious in character, but within a short time they were transformed into religio-national ones. This is no guarantee that the cycle will continue in the

twenty-first century. There is also no reason to believe that it will not. The Jewish penchant for self-organization so dramatically manifested in recent years in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe seems to push the Jews to find that kind of comprehensive renaissance.

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Daniel J. Elazar is President of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. Manfred Gerstenfeld is a Fellow of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and is an international consultant specializing in business and environmental strategy to the senior ranks of multi-national corporations.