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Jewish Religious Organization

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Today every Jewish community is organized through a mixture of territorially and nonterritorially based institutions.[1] Local political units are, with some modifications, used as the basis for the organization of local Jewish communities throughout the world. At the same time, the ideological and functional divisions in the Jewish community also provide significant points for organization as do particular functions and certain common interests, which are then linked to the territorial community through certain common mechanisms.

The territorially based organizations such as the Jewish community federations in the United States and Canada, local authorities in Israel, or the state boards of Jewish deputies in Australia are invariable the most comprehensive ones, charged with providing direction for the community as a whole or some segment of it. The ideological, functional, and interest-based organizations such as the synagogues or the social services agencies generally touch the more personal aspects of Jewish life. The two bases of communal organization are recognizable distinct as such, but the specific units of organization are usually demarcated much less distinctly.

Because of the nature of the Jewish community, the territorially based organizations do not necessarily have clear-cut boundaries. This situation is not a particular problem with Jews because Jewish political culture views boundaries from a West-Asian rather than an Anglo-American perspective. For Jews, the world is divided into oases and deserts rather than into clear-cut territorial plots. Every oasis has a clear core and shifting periphery as it fades into the desert at the shifting edge of the watered area, which changes with changes in the internal water supply of the oasis. The desert, in turn, belongs to nobody or everybody. Thus the periphery can expand or contract without significantly changing the character of the core. Both Jewish law and Jewish political organization are structured in this way. For traditional Jews, law consists of a hard, immutable core (the Torah), surrounded by layers of interpretive applications, each of which becomes bonded to the original over time, expanding the whole corpus. Thus, Jewish culture has come to look upon law as requiring a fixed core of observance with room for interpretation at the peripheries. Jews are bound to but not bounded by their law. Its observance is, in the last analysis, a personal responsibility reinforced by community expectations and pressures. Both clearly reflect the situation in the land of Israel and the Middle East as a whole.

Western European institutions in contrast took form in well-watered countries, where lands are divided by fixed boundaries that serve as receptacles. Status is determined by

who is inside a particular set of boundaries and who is not. Normally, there are no lands outside boundaries in the Western European world. For Europeans then, the core is far less important than the fixed boundaries.[2] In many respects, local territorial communities are simply aggregates of Jews in particular cities or metropolitan areas.

Much the same pattern prevails with regard to ideologically-based organizations. By and large the ideologies of the late modern epoch have lost their power to attract. Once powerful Zionist movements survive as Israeli political parties, vehicles for individuals to obtain leadership positions in the Jewish community or by performing specific tasks within the community. Organizations representing the non-Zionist secular ideologies hardly survive at all. The "oasis" pattern describes their reality.

The religious movements have fared better, particularly a resurgent Orthodoxy. Throughout the world a new ideologically militant Orthodoxy has emerged, using a new network of yeshivot as their nuclei. While the core of Orthodox Judaism has grown extensively, it is still true that, outside of Israel and the United States, few members of Orthodox congregations throughout the world are seriously Orthodox. This is even more true of the Conservative and Reform movements, which are built around even smaller cores of serious Conservative and Reform Jews with large masses of more casual members attracted to their respective congregations by location, habit, family and friendship patterns, if not by historical or geographic accident. In the orthodox camp, where ideology takes traditionally religious forms, ideological groupings have succeeded in maintaining themselves and their ideologies in organized form. As yet they represent small if vital minorities within the Jewish people. Their vitality already has given them a weight beyond their numbers.

For the polity as a whole, ideologically based organizations have had more success on a worldwide or countrywide basis where the absence of comprehensive territorial institutions has been marked, than on the local plane. All told, however, modernity emphasized the territorial over the nonterritorial elements wherever given half a chance and to reduce ideologically based organizations to functional specialists responsible for specific tasks.

A major result of this has been to limit the powers of the countrywide organizations in the diaspora and to make the primary locus of decision making for those communities local. This takes two forms. In one, the dominant local community either constitutes or captures well nigh total control of the countrywide Jewish organizations, so that they, in essence, express the perspective and interests of that community. This is the pattern in countries like Sweden and France.

In the other form, the countrywide organizations are weak compared with the local ones and are either ignored or manipulated by the local ones as they deem necessary. That is the pattern in the United States and Brazil. In a few cases, Australia, South Africa, and Switzerland, for example the countrywide organizations do have a significant independent standing. Only in Israel, where the countrywide organizations are either state

institutions or closely intertwined with the state, do they play a dominant role as such, not as extensions of some local community or congeries of local communities.

What emerges is not a single pyramidal structure, not even one in which the "bottom" rules the "top" as is sometimes suggested on the organization charts. There is no "bottom" or "top" except on a functional basis for specific purposes (if then). Instead there is a matrix of organizations and institutions linked by a shared communications network and stronger or weaker training institutions. This absence of hierarchy is the first element to recognize in examining how Jews make their institutions work.[3]

The Role of Functional Groupings

In the context described above, the institutions and organizations of the Jewish polity group themselves in five major spheres of public activity: (1) religious-congregational, (2) educational-cultural, (3) external relations-defense, (4) communal-welfare, and (5) Israel-world Jewry.[4] This article continues its focus to the religious-congregational sphere.

Contemporary synagogues provide the immediately personal and interpersonal ritual-cum-social functions demanded by the community and, inmost countries, do so primarily through highly independent individual congregations. The congregations have a monopoly of those functions locally; the synagogue confederations, rabbinical associations, seminaries, and yeshivot maintain a parallel monopoly of the community's organized religious and *halakhic* concerns countrywide. The only new-style institutions to have emerged in this sphere in the postwar period are the religious study and research centers. These include bodies such as CLAL in the United States and the Pardes and Shalom Hartman institutes in Israel, which offer religious motivation and instruction to Jews seeking to reconnect with Jewish religious tradition.

Locally, the congregations may be supplemented by such manifestations of Orthodoxy (occasionally paralleled in the Conservative movement) as a rabbinical court and kashrut council. In the larger communities, there are also "Orthodox outposts," yeshivot or branches of the Lubavitcher movement that serve (and try to develop) special constituencies. In addition, intercongregational regional organizations and boards of rabbis are in the larger local communities.

Countrywide, the synagogues are organized according to one of four models, as unions, federations, confederations, or leagues or some combination thereof. France and Britain offer two models of synagogue unions. The French consistoire, established in Napoleonic times, follows a classically centralized model. It was a veritable instrument of the state for most of the nineteenth century, until the French separated church and state in 1905. It remained dominant in the community until World War II but subsequently became secondary to the CRIF, the representative body of French Jewry, and the FSJU, the community's functioning arm.

Although the structure of the consistoire was changed from time to time, its basic form has remained constant. It is centered in Paris with regional consistorial bodies either subsidiary to Paris or dependent on it, with only Alsace-Lorraine outside the model because of its special political status as a disputed territory between Germany and France. The chief rabbi of the Consistoire Central is the chief rabbi of France. He is supported by a small conseil laique. All synagogues are technically the property of the consisoire in which they are located, and rabbis are formally appointed by the appropriate consistorial body.[5]

The United Synagogue, the dominant synagogue body in Britain is somewhat less centralized in the British style. There, too, member synagogues are owned by the common body, which must approve the appointment of congregational rabbis, all of whom are under the authority of the Ashkenazic chief rabbi. In Britain, the board of the United Synagogue has somewhat greater authority vis-a-vis the chief rabbi than in France, because France is more hierarchical in its organizational culture. Boards in Britain consist of persons with independent bases in the community. Moreover, except in areas of doctrinal controversy, the United Synagogue rules its member congregations with a lighter hand, allowing a measure of decentralization roughly parallel to that which Parliament allows British local authorities.[6]

The South African Federation of Synagogues is a good example of the federation model. Individual congregations are independent to the extent that they are owned by their members who appoint their own rabbis but are bound closely with one another under the authority of the chief rabbi of South Africa.[7]

The American model offers the best example of the use of confederations and leagues. Three great synagogue confederations, for the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform movements, plus a smaller one for the Reconstructionist movement and various subsidiary leagues within the Orthodox community embrace most of the permanent synagogues in the United States. However, because every congregation is independent and self-contained under the law - the private preserve of its members - there is no need for it to be a member of any larger body if its members choose not to be. Hence many congregations are independent and many others are nominal members of the countrywide bodies. Consequently, the latter have little power aside from that of professional placement. Even then, every congregation, no matter how committed it may be to its movement, hires its own rabbinical staff, under its own terms, in what amounts to a free market situation.[8] The controlling power of the individual synagogues in the religious-congregational sphere in the United States means that a large share of Jewish activity - involving nearly half the total local expenditure of American Jewry - is raised and managed outside any communal decision-making system.

In 1926, their common quest for an expanded role in American Jewish life, the three great synagogue confederations formed a league, the Synagogue Council of America. For a few years during the height of the "religious revival" of the 1950's, it tried to capture the leading role as spokesman for American Jewry. Nominally, it is the Jewish religious counterpart to the National Council of Churches and the Catholic Council of Bishops but

does not actually play such a role. Its principal function today is to provide the only religious forum where representatives of Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reform still meet on common issues.

Each synagogue confederation has a seminary, which, because of its academic character, projects itself on the American Jewish scene in a quasi-independent way. Even with the growth of Judaic studies programs in academic institutions, these seminaries remain the backbone of organized Jewish scholarship in the United States. Their alumni lead the congregations of American Jewry and, through their rabbinical associations, link their seminaries and the confederations.

There are also a growing number of yeshivot in New York and other major Jewish communities that reflect the great growth and proliferation of the new ultra-Orthodox elements in the community. They preserve and extend traditional Jewish scholarship on a scale never before experienced in American Jewish history.

In Israel, the religious-congregational sphere is divided between the formal institutions of the state and thousands of small independent congregations. Some have buildings and activities apart from worship services but most are limited to places of worship with traditional study circles attached and occasional events such as evenings of liturgical music or lectures by prominent rabbinical personalities. Through the Ministry of Religions and the local religious councils, the state provides a variety of religious services. The state-appointed and supported rabbinical courts deal with the most practical manifestations of Jewish law particularly in matters of personal status, which are exclusively under their jurisdiction. Thus the Israeli dichotomy is such that the congregations themselves play no role in the governance of the Jewish polity and confine themselves to most local religious activities; while the major governmental institution of the Jewish polity, the State of Israel, provides all other services directly or through local religious councils, arms of municipal government.

Since World War II, there have been some tentative but real steps toward the development of world-wide institutions in the religious-congregational sphere. Formally, these include the world leagues of synagogues that are tied to each of the major branches of Judaism. Although they have developed a presence of sorts, they remain tertiary institutions in the overall scheme of things, established, maintained, and directed from the United States, or by Americans who have relocated in Israel. All three have joined the World Zionist Organization (WZO), which invited them to do so in an effort to strengthen its position on the Jewish scene vis-a-vis the reconstituted Jewish Agency, which is increasingly dominated by the local community federations. The WZO, in turn, has bolstered the three worldwide synagogue movements by providing them with a way to participate in world Jewish politics, and supplying them with funds enabling them to do so far beyond what their countrywide congregational bodies are prepared to provide.

Much stronger are the worldwide bodies of the ultra-Orthodox, including Agudath Israel, Habad (the Lubavitcher movement), and other Hassidic communities that emanate from the religious-congregational sphere but extend their work beyond that sphere into most of

the others. All of these bodies are considerably older than the world synagogue leagues, but all, even those whose movement antecedents go back to the eighteenth century, are essentially twentieth-century phenomena. Agudath Israel was founded in 1912 and, in many respects, serves as an umbrella organization for most of them. A federation of movements of the ultra-Orthodox camp, it is built around three recognizable elements from eastern Europe: the communities of the Lithuanian yeshivot, Polish ultra-Orthodoxy, and the Hungarian-Romanian Hassidic courts. Each of the three has its representatives in the Israeli Knesset through the party[10] to the extent that they choose.

Unlike the world synagogue leagues, Agudath Israel has structured a comprehensive subpolity within the Jewish people. The Council of Torah Sages, maintains the upper hand by explicit design, but this does not lessen the reality of subordinate set of professional politicians occupying appropriate positions in the Jewish world, and the various Hassidic groups have elaborated structures, with Habad having the most extensive. Though they, too, emerge from this sphere to overlap into others, they are somewhat more confined to the mainstream concerns of the sphere though in their own way.[11]

The Israeli rabbinate is a real force in the religious-congregational sphere throughout the Jewish world by virtue of its role in determining the personal status of individual Jews in Israel. In an age of jet travel and growing population interchange between Israel and the diaspora, such decisions have ramifications that reverberate throughout the Jewish world. In this connection, the Israeli Knesset has acquired unsought influence in the religious-congregational sphere, the first "secular" body anywhere to do so, simply because of its central role in defining "Who is a Jew" for purposes of Israeli law in a situation where religion and state are intertwined. The religious-congregational sphere is in the curious situation of, on one hand, being a powerful influence on all Jews, yet unable to mobilize even half of them in any formal relationship to religious institutions in the diaspora. With the exception of those few communities that still maintain community-wide registration of Jews, membership in synagogues or congregations is voluntary and if one chooses not to affiliate with some religious body, one is simply not affiliated. Thus in the United States perhaps 50 percent of the Jewish community maintains a synagogue affiliation at any give time, though approximately three-quarters of all Jews will have been affiliated with a synagogue at some time or another. In France, membership figures are even lower.

In Israel, where a different pattern of affiliation prevails, the "membership" figure is undoubtedly much lower, but then every Jew is linked to the religious-congregational sphere through his or her being bound as a Jew to halakhic laws of personal status through the state's rabbinate and religious institutions.

In a sense this situation reflects the different stages or directions of modernization in the Jewish world. In pre-modern times, all Jews were doubly bound by halakhah and by the social pressure of the community to be substantially observant. Today the binding force of *halakhah* or an other than voluntary basis has mostly disappeared except in Israel, where it has been reduced to the area of personal status. So, too, social pressure no longer prevails except where people choose to be part of subcommunities of observant Jews.

Otherwise, the character and extent of linkage with the religious-congregational affiliation to being part of a Jewish community in which the religious dimension is built in. The only issue in which all Jews may be subject to some kind of binding decision-making is in determining Jewishness itself, that is to say, "Who is a Jew," where, because of the influence of Israel, the decisions of its authoritative institutions on this question are authoritative for the Jewish world as a whole.

Notes

1. The combination of territorial and nonterritorial patterns of communal organization is clearly portrayed for the diaspora in the *American Jewish Year Book* (published annually since 1899 by the American Jewish Committee and the Jewish Publication Society of America). See also S. P.Goldberg, *The American Jewish Community: Its Structure, Role and Organizations* (New York: Women's ORT Community Service Publication, 1968); Howard R. Penniman, ed., *Israel at the Polls: The Knesset Elections of 1977* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1979); Daniel J. Elazar with Peter Medding, *Jewish Communities in Frontier Societies: Argentina, Australia, and South Africa* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1983); and Daniel J. Elazar and Stuart A. Cohen, *The Jewish Polity* (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 1984).

2. See Max Kadushin, *Organic Thinking: A Study in Rabbinic Thought* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1938); Elazar and Medding, *Jewish Communities in Frontier Societies*, pp. 80-82; Daniel J. Elazar, "Land Space and Civil Society in America," in *Land Settlement Policy* (Raleigh, N.C.: North Carolina State University, 1969).

3. Ernest Stock describes this phenomenon in "The Absence of Hierarchy: Notes on the Organization of the American Jewish Community, *Jewish Journal of Sociology*, vol. 21, no.2 (December 1970), pp. 195-200.

4. See Daniel J. Elazar, *Community and Polity: The Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1976), chap. 5.

5. Phyllis Cohen Albert, *The Modernization of French Jewry: Consistory and Community in the Nineteenth Century* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 1977); Paula Hyman, *From Dreyfus to Vichy: The Remaking of French Jewry, 1906-1939* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

6. *Chiai HaYehudim be-Britania* (Jewish Life in Britain), issue of *Tefutsot Yisrael,* vol 21, no. 4 (Winter 1983) (Hebrew); Sonia L. Lipman and Vivian D. Lipman, *Jewish Life in Britain 1962-1977* (New York: K. G. Sauer, 1981); V. D. Lipman, ed., *Three Centuries of Anglo-Jewish History* (London: The Jewish Historical Society of England, 1961).

7. Elazar and Medding, *Jewish Communities in Frontier Societies,* chap.12; Steven B. Aschheim, "The Communal Organization of South African Jewry," *Jewish Journal of Sociology*, vol 12, no. 1 (June 1970), pp. 201-31. (Reprinted by the Center for Jewish Community Studies.)

8. *Yihudo veAtido shel Beit-Haknesset be America* (The American Synagogue: Its Uniqueness and Future), issue of *Tefutsot Israel,* vol 20, no. 3, (Summer 1982) (hebrew); Moshe Davis, *The Emergence of Conservative Judaism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1963); Leonard J. Fein, et. al., *Reform Is a Verb* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1972); Leon Jick, "An Intimate Portrait of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations: A Centennial Documentary," *American Jewish Archive,* vol. 25 (April 1973), pp. 3-115; Charles S. Liebman, "Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life," *American Jewish Year Book 1965*, vol 66, pp. 21-97; Gunther W. Plaut, *The Rise of Reform Judaism* (New York: World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1963-65); Marshall Sklare, *Conservative Judaism: An American Religious Movement* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972); Joseph L. Blau, *Reform Judaism: A Historical Perspective* (New York: Ktav, 1973); Jacob Neusner, ed., *Sectors of American Judaism: Reform, Orthodoxy, Conservative and Reconstructionism* (New York: Ktav, 1975).

9. S.Z. Abromov, *Perpetual Dilemma* (Rutherford, N. J.: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1976); Zvi Yaron, "Religion in Israel," *American Jewish Year Book 1976*, vo. 76, pp.41-90; Charles Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya, *Religion and Politics in Israel* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1984).

10. Menachem Friedman, *Havrah ve Hadat: HaOrthodoxiya Halo Tzionit be Eretz Yisrael 1918-1936* (The Non-Zionist Orthodox Movement in the Land of Israel), (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, 1978) (Hebrew); Joseph Friedenson, *A History of Agudat Israel* (New York: Agudath Israel of America, 1970); Eliezer Don-Yehiya, "Origins and Development of the Agudah and Mafdal Parties," *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 20 (Summer 1981), pp. 49-64; *Yaakov Rosenheim Memorial Anthology: A Concise History of Agudat Israel* (New York: Orthodox Library, 1968).

11. Jerome R. Mintz, "Ethnic Activism: The Hassidic Example," *Judaism*, vol. 28, no. 4 (Fall 1979), pp. 449-64; Harry M. Rabinowicz, *A Guide to Hassidism* (New York: T. Yoseloff, 1960); Israel Rubin, *Satmar: An Island in the City* (Chicago: Quardrangle, 1972).