JEWISH RATIONALE AND SECTARIANISM *

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THE Jews of America live somewhere between the two polarities of identification and integration; between distinctiveness and sameness. For some few this represents an intolerant ambivalence; for most of us it offers an opportunity for a richer and more colorful life as both individuals and members of a group.

In his Detroit study, Arnold Gurin offers striking evidence of the validity of this basic proposition when he analyzes typical Jewish leader-responses. He notes this basic ambivalence in a variety of choices that confront the Jews in how they will live as individuals and as an organized community. The typical Jewish leader takes into account both *religious* and *ethnic* factors in making his value judgments, in deciding on his own personal involvement and even in describing his views of the organized Jewish community. There is a tension (constructive, I believe) which must be recognized if we are to understand the Jewish community around us. The heart of any commentary on Gurin's thesis is that the sameness that we talk about is not always the same and that the otherness that we assert is not always different.

But let us go back a little to examine some of the characteristics of our group so that we can deal more effectively with these polarities of integration and separation.

We start with the fact that there is in the 1960's in the United States at large and in every city of size such a thing as a Jewish group, a recognizable social entity. For want of a better label we call it a community. We sometimes describe it as an *organized* community. In more modest moments we talk of those in this *organized* community as opposed to others in fairly large numbers who are not part of the organized community, but who are Jews nonetheless.

And *who* are Jews? Certainly, everyone born of Jewish parents is by virtue of that fact himself a Jew and is so regarded by himself, by other Jews and by persons who are not Jews. Must he have any particular religious belief or formal affiliation with a synagogue to be a Jew? Does he need affirmatively to affiliate with any central Jewish organization? The answer seems to be no. The content and quality of his relationships may be of some consequence. These, along with the material contribution he makes toward the support of cooperative programs and services and the extent and depth of his involvement, may all have a bearing on how much of a Jew he is, or, in the judgment of

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others, how *good* a Jew he is. But whether or not he formally belongs, or contributes, or does or does not get involved in any other way, he is a Jew, and, short of the positive act of dissociating himself from his fellow-Jews by joining another group—specifically a religious group—he continues to be a Jew.

With no element of surprise or novelty, and without the slightest pejorative intent, let me submit that the Jews are a *strange* group. It would perhaps be more objective to say that we are a *unique* group.

We are a people and we are a religion. We are an ethnic group with a common religion and we are a religious group with a common ethnicity. We have a deep and abiding identification with and loyalty toward the America of our birth and, for those of us who were not born here, toward the country of our adoption. We have historic associations, sometimes nostalgic, more often traumatic, with the land from which our parents or their parents came one, two or three generations ago. In another part of the globe we have a special sentimental attachment for Israel, a country that had not been peopled by our ancestors as a majority for as far back as sixty generations or so. For Jews within the borders of Israel, one of the forms of attachment to each other is definitely political; for us in America, the link is made up rather of a common historic faith, a shared peoplehood and the ties of a humanitarian fellowship. The specific components of the relationship may vary for the individual; it certainly is unlike the affinity that members of any other group have for their forefathers in another country, if indeed they could even identify them, with ties so far away and so far back in time.

So here we are, unfolding our characteristics through our social patterns, our culture, our religion, our languages and our folk-lore, but never, even in the darkest days, without some reference to the world beyond us. Since the Enlightenment we present an ever greater overlay of new communal attributes, imposed on us and assumed by us in the larger society which has opened up to us.

Always, and especially so in the free Western world, we have been engaged in reconciling that we are at the same time both "regular" and "special." Our apologists have been busy explaining how much like other people we are. We have been pridefully concerned with the statistics, the demography and the social research that make out a case for our acceptance in the larger society and for our guidance toward full acceptance in the universities, in access to housing, in vocational and social opportunities, but at the same time we do not want to look too good. When we could no longer boast as convincingly of our almost complete absence from the prison population, for example, we made a virtue of the changing situation by asserting our right to a fair share of delinquents and criminals. We wanted people to know that we take care of our own, but then, after 1945 and again in 1948, we were torn between the desire to tell the world how much we were raising in our campaigns and the fear that the world might think all Jews were rich. We appealed to fellow-Jews to set a higher standard in our giving than others do in theirs, but we didn't feel comfortable about our neighbors using this laudable, but presumable peculiar conduct against us. There are innumerable instances that might be cited to show that, even when we recognized that our special background, our particular needs, or our peculiar patterns of history or organization called for some differences in approach, in program, in interpretation, or in level of giving, we were caught in the trap of our desire not to appear too different. We have designed ingeni-

ous and sometimes humorous ways of reconciling differences in dress, in food, and in conduct, in our desire to retain distinctiveness and at the same time to adapt.

Even in the performance of our social services, one of our most characteristic activities, we find a similar problem of unbalancing values. There are at least two needs being met, those of the recipient and those of the donor. Rosenwald, Rothschild, and Montefiore were names of great prestige not only for their wealth, but also for the specific disposition of their wealth. The overseer of the poor always held a prestigious position. The act of benevolence carries with it a mark of holiness to the donor entirely apart from its effect on the poor or the stranger. The duty imposed by the Mosaic injunction was translated into traditional practice by the individual Jew and, collectively, by Jews living together. The object of the benefactor changed from place to place and from time to time, but the subjective need to discharge the act of loving-kindness, the requirement and the urge to lead the good life have remained constant over the centuries.

The historic idealization of righteousness as a virtue has often been tempered, however, by a less than noble self-interest. When some of the established Jews of New York raised funds in the eighties to deal with the new immigrants, there were those among the donors who were ready to use the money not to help toward adjustment to a new America but for return steamship fares to Europe. They were ready to help people on their way, but getting them out of the way was, for some, an impelling force. To be sure, this was not the prevailing motivation, but it tends to show that all so-called philanthropy is not necessarily philanthropic.

In a discussion of secularism and the Jewish agencies, dictionary definitions, one would assume, might be helpful to us, perhaps not in making clear what is in fact Jewish, since that is an area where we might not need such external aids, but in determining what is meant by secular and what we mean by sectarian. The dictionaries we commonly use are products of the Western (I almost want to say Christian) culture. Secular, we are told, pertains to this world, or the present life, as opposed to eternity and the life to come; it has reference to temporal rather than spiritual affairs; it means worldly. Secularism carries with it a regard for the affairs and interests of this life and neglect of matters pertaining to a future existence. And a secularist is one who rejects all religious systems and forms of worship, concerning himself only with the questions and needs of the present life; one who believes in improving the material condition of himself and others rather than in ministering to spiritual wants; also, one who believes that religion should not be introduced into the public education or the management of public affairs. It also means the conversion or transfer from sacred to secular or temporal uses or *control.*

Somehow, some of these definitions do not take into sufficient account the peculiar differences within the Jewish group. In one sense it can be said that all of the Jewish agencies, being outside the synagogue, are secular even when they serve only Jews and are just as secular when they also serve non-Jews. What we really are assuming, I suppose, is that for our discussion, Jewish secularism doesn't have too much to do with the dictionary definition of religion, and that even when our programs have the ethnic base and non-synagogual auspices, they are Jewish and hence, even when secular are still sectarian.

But let us take a look at one of the other definitions: a secularist is one who believes that religion should not be intro-

duced into the management of public affairs. Turn it around. Is it possible to talk of a secularist who believes in the introduction of public affairs into religion? And, as the payment for social services is expanded by government from field to field, and for all ages and various conditions, doesn't there come the time to examine more closely where a line needs to be drawn, in law by the government and by the courts and voluntarily, by the secular and at the same time sectarian private agency, in the interest of preserving if not its purity, its ability to discharge the specific functions it was intended to serve?

So far, we have been considering secular agencies which owe no formal allegiance to the specifically religious institutions, and Jewish social agencies are clearly not religious in that sense, but we have not reckoned with the definition of sectarian. Here we come up with a new complication. The Jewish agencies, by virtue of their name, their assumed function and the general acceptance of their role by religionists and secularists alike, do regard themselves as Jewish and therefore certainly are sectarian. And here, the dictionary definition, the acceptance by all kinds of Jews and the understanding in the general community, make Jewish and sectarian every agency that calls itself Jewish.

A sect is defined as a body distinguished by peculiarities of faith and practice from other bodies and adhering to the same general system, and it also is a group united in opinion or interest. Institutions under such auspices are thought of as sectarian, and, by that generally accepted definition, Jewish agencies are at one and the same time Jewish, religious, ethnic, secular, sectarian and private, sometimes even quasi-public, in different proportions and degree, but encompassing all of these attributes. Given this seeming contradiction in terms, the American Jewish community has somehow lived rather comfortably with these strange but real facts of life.

Some observers decry this state of affairs and refer disparagingly to Jewish community life as a culture of organizations. Harold Weisberg has observed that while the range of activities which most concern the Jewish community is a continuation and extension of traditional community interests and expressions of Jewish values, the organizations are now "almost the whole of Jewish culture." This condition he accepts as evidence of the coming of age of the American Jewish community and he ascribes this development to the increased institutional apparatus it has required, the enormous overseas responsibilities it has assumed, the striking growth of religious institutions and organizations and the changed social status of American Jews. The intellectual and emotional demands of this culture of organizations, he observes, are not burdensome. They are, he says, precisely what appeals to the leisure-consumption status orientation of most American Jews. Community ideologies seek to overcome doubt through activity and loneliness through organization, he notes, and he adds that one behaves regularly as an American and believes as a Jew, and hopefully what he holds in the latter will affect what he does in the former. Weisberg has serious misgivings about the culture of organizations and yet he concludes that it is this community which keeps the Jews and Judaism alive in America, and he doubts that ideologies other than the accepted ones can find a place inside the conformist culture.

One of the most striking evidences of this capacity of American Jews to give a common home to what appears to be conflicting values is the way we have intertwined the benevolence towards others with self-help through mutual aid. A hospital is for the sick poor, but it is

also a place with which the contributor identifies himself and his family. The community center "keeps kids off the street and prevents delinquency," but it also serves as a clubhouse for a sizable part of the population, including the contributor's children and frequently his parents. The community relations agencies protect *him* against his enemies and make life more livable, not just for somebody else, but for him personally and for his children. His campaign contribution helps people in Israel who need his help, and the story of that "great little democratic country" and its progress instill in *him* great satisfaction and pride.

The American Jew sees the justification for Jewish agencies in the meeting of personal needs. There may be a lag in his knowledge of external changes that have altered the necessity for old programs and he may complain that the family agency doesn't give relief, but he is loyal to the idea of "taking care of our own" as a valid generalization, even if the details are vague. He favors the agencies that serve distinctive *Jewish* need, and if the need served is no longer peculiarly Jewish or mainly Jewish or solely Jewish, he nevertheless likes the agency because it makes a contribution to the whole community. He does not put a top priority on education and culture, but these have a respected place in the scheme of his generalized interests. His interest in Israel is largely philanthropic, but it also expresses a warm kinship with Jews the world over and a deep concern for the continuing well-being of Israel and its people.

As a contributor to the annual campaign he doesn't sense that the opposing forces of identification and integration are at work, and yet, if the community leaders properly interpret his feelings, he believes that building a stronger community is important, but he also feels that helping individuals in need is very important. Being Jewish is primarily a religious matter, he says, but the universal ethical virtues of brotherhood and benevolence are dominant in his expressed thoughts about himself and his relationship to his fellow-Jews. As a composite person he looks favorably on the entire program of communal support and operation. He doesn't think that issues like group survival, or the dangers of intermarriage are as immediate or as great a concern for federation and its agencies (or for him) as leading the good life. More often than not, he even believes that it is not the business of federation to promote Jewishness. He is, however, at peace with the programs that do just that, but his emphasis, at least through federation and its services, is on the philanthropic thrust. Frequently, he is also active in a congregation and his viewpoint as to federation's distinct role does not stem from lack of religious affiliation, but may even flow from it.

He belongs—and he gives—because federation is an instrument for good and he wants to help. If he is a leader he accepts the general good of all the agencies, the entire program. He is willing to go along. There is no great pressure to find a clear-cut rationale for all this.

Arnold Gurin has painted an interesting portrait of the Jewish community leader in Detroit. There may be some variation from city to city, and while we need more studies on the background and attitudes of key communal figures, observations in the field support his findings. For community organization workers the portrait is encouraging because it confirms the impression that the sharpness of conflict is easing off between overseas and local pulls, between identification and integration, between the associational and the communal, between philanthropy and culture, between the religious and the secular, between public and private commitments, between

one functional field and another, between any two opposing poles. In reckoning with changing attitudes, it is comforting to know that the umbrella or united front concept is embodied in a growing acceptance of pooled activity.

Each field of service has its own history and its own justification. Each has its own special strength or weakness in the amount of self-support it can muster from members, patients and clients. Each field's development is affected not only by our internal appraisal but also by the growing role of government concern and government financing. The balance that we seek in a local community is also affected by the community chest's position on minority group programs, on problems in old and new neighborhoods and by the new definitions of open-end support for all, regardless of auspices.

The one danger lies in the softened, the muted, feelings for specific positions. There are fewer antagonists than there used to be, and so, perhaps, there are also fewer zealots. The abstract idea of a federation and of an evolving community wins logical support; but reasonableness doesn't carry with it wild enthusiasm.

As a new generation comes forward, more educated, better established economically and less related to the wellsprings of Jewish tradition, the ties to established forms of organization loosen; its loyalty is more likely to be to the generalized constellation rather to any one agency, or any single approach. The emerging federation personality, both as leader and as giver, feels that the whole is greater than any one part—and greater, stronger and more meaningful than the sum of its parts. Studies that consistently point this up are valuable in approaching our community organization tasks; they can guide us in involving the younger generation, the so-called new leadership. They can help flesh out the case for centralized giving, for budgeting with a true respect for the ongoing will of our public and for orchestrated planning.

In the broad fellowship that permits opposing viewpoints to brush up against each other *within* the family, rather than outside, we have a platform that rules out no positive ideology. The professional leadership of the enabler has been demeaned by those who are certain and fixed in their particular position in Jewish life. The Gurin study shows that there is no likely victory for one position over another in the early future but that accommodation and compromise are the order of the day. In the voluntary subculture of a larger voluntary society we may be developing programs that will not keep every fringe group happy. We may lose this person or that person on the edges, but our concept of community has the vitality of Jewish tradition, the acceptance of the society around us, the status and the satisfactions that are meaningful to large numbers.

Viability, as it flows, and strength of organization as it grows, will allow for contraction in one direction, expansion in another—will allow for the drop-outs to a more appealing society here and there and for the marshalling of new forces. The professional's function is to keep the movement flexible and congenial, to know the difference between principle and personality, to continue to offer avenues of involvement and opportunities for securing the group purposes, however the Jewish group in its sectarian wisdom may define them. The purpose of life is life more abundant, and the life of the Jewish group, as always, will adapt its sectarian aspects to include still undetermined proportions of the religious and the secular, and with changing ratios of nonsectarianism and public participation depending partly

on our own will and partly on external forces. Any rationale, however fluid, considers both values and realities within a conceptual framework that states and relates systematically the various facets through which Jewish life in America finds expression. In this process the continued understanding of the facts as they unfold can be a valuable tool. The vitality and the wisdom to draw out the facts and to interpret them continues to be our concern.