I'll Put Down My Institution if You Put Down Yours

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Writing for **eJPhil**, Robert Evans and Avrum Lapin point out that we have, in the United States, "**Too Many Jewish Institutions**".

> As a community, we have funneled untold billions of dollars and other human capital into constructing Jewish institutions – museums, hospitals, social service agencies, arts and cultural entities – that in too many cases would be more suitable as smaller components of larger facilities rather than as “stand alone” entities...
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> ... It is not our role to state which institutions hold the most value, reputation or prestige. That is the role of stakeholders, constituents and leaders. However, our logic tells us that if your city already has millions of dollars invested in a Jewish art museum, you probably don’t need to build a new institution nearby that could feature exhibits and collections housed elsewhere.
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> We should also address the specialization of each institution. If there is a strongly-supported American Jewish history museum, does there need to be a Russian-American Jewish history museum, a European-American Jewish history museum, a Spanish-American Jewish history museum or can we cover them all under one set of four walls?...
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> ...Why not a Jewish Arts Center in a synagogue complex built to include a Holocaust Remembrance wing? By putting these entities all into one building, we are preserving precious resources and reflecting on cooperation and other efficiencies.

I can just imagine the meeting between all those "stakeholders, constituents and leaders." Somebody starts the meeting off noting that a lot of the institutions represented in the room, in the words of Evans and Lapin, 'would be more suitable as smaller components of larger facilities." "Sure," another leader will respond, "some of us need to be subsumed. Fine. You go first." The egos of leaders can be annoying, but the egos of leaders do not constitute an entirely harmful force. When leaders feel like big shots of organizations, they're more invested. Spreading around the ego-boost is a very real way to spread around engagement.

But this isn't really about leaders' egos. Another quibble: the authors seem to assume the existence of a certain, stable-sized pot of funding which can either be divided among many institutions or given to fewer of them in larger portions. This is a false assumption. Perhaps there are certain donors who will donate generously to a Russian-American Jewish history museum, but who will not give anything at all for an American Jewish history museum. In such a case, the separate museum is not necessarily as inefficient as one might assume. How much of the redundancy really represents money that could be consolidated, and how much represents money that will be spent either redundantly or not at all? It would seem quite difficult to say.

Let me not belabor this point, however. I fully concede that inefficiency is rampant in American Jewish communal life. The real problem is that human life is not all about efficiency. The most efficient meal would be a perfectly calibrated nutritional concoction delivered intravenously, but I think most of us would rather have a nice meal. Consider: how many of the best days of your life could be best described by the word "efficient"? I don't mean to say that efficiency counts for nothing -- just that it only counts as much as it counts, because other things count too.

Some of those things that count are the vast diversity of views and ideologies in

American Jewish life -- differences that sometimes require institutions with divergent missions, values, and operational guidelines. To the authors' rhetorical question, "Why not a Jewish Arts Center in a synagogue complex built to include a Holocaust Remembrance wing?" I answer: what kind of synagogue complex? Whose shul gets the community's art, and what does that say to the people who daven across the street?

The countless throngs of Jewish organizations that have sprung up from **generations ago** to **the present** tell the story of a people unlikely to fall suddenly into lockstep with one another, and I'm not ready to say that's a bad thing. Evans and Lapin make a point worth considering, and I'm sure there are many cases in which they're right. But in a world of declining civic engagement, do we really want to say that fewer of us should be starting organizations? Maybe we do. Maybe we need more joiners, more humble servants, and fewer egotistical leaders. But I do hope we conduct the conversation rightly started by Evans and Lapin on grounds far broader than efficiency alone.