

Some Questions on "Ethnic" Status

A number of different problems relating to "ethnicity" and "group status" are presenting themselves to the Jewish community at this time. They are different kinds of problems and present themselves to different agencies and policy-making bodies of the Jewish community. But there are a couple of common threads running through these problems which make it necessary for the various Jewish agencies to know what each other is doing - and, hopefully, to make their different policy decisions in a way which are somewhat consistent with each other, and with the needs of the total Jewish community. Examples of these problems:

Situation 1: The Public Schools

The San Francisco school system is setting up an "Ethnic Heritage Study Center," as authorized by and financed by the National Ethnic Heritage Act, recently passed by Congress.

This is the "statement of policy" for that Act: "In recognition of the heterogeneous composition of the Nation and of the fact that in a multi-ethnic society a greater understanding of the contributions of one's own heritage and those of one's fellow citizens can contribute to a more harmonious, patriotic and committed populace, and in recognition of the principle that all persons in the educational institutions of the Nation should have an opportunity to learn about the differing and unique contributions to the national heritage made by each ethnic group, it is the purpose of this title to provide assistance designed to afford to students opportunities to learn about the nature of their own cultural heritage, and to study the contributions of the cultural heritages of the ethnic groups of the Nation."

The Act then provides for the Ethnic Heritage Culture Centers to: 1) "develop curriculum materials for use in elementary and secondary schools and institutions of higher education relating to the history, geography, society, economy, literature, art, music, drama, language, and general culture of the groups with which the Center is concerned, and the contributions of those ethnic groups to the American heritage." 2) to disseminate these curriculum materials in the schools; 3) to provide training for those using these curriculum materials; 4) "cooperate with persons and organizations in the communities being served by the center to assist them in promoting, encouraging, developing or procuding programs or other activities in such communities which relate to the history, culture or traditions of ethnic groups."

In the S.F. schools, the system is initially set up to explicitly accommodate the "minority groups" which are now customarily designated: Black, Latino, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Samoan, Filipino, American Indian. Administration of the Center is placed under an existing ESAA committee with citizens drawn explicitly from those groups. There is a category for "Other Whites", but it is not clear how that will be implemented. Nor is every conceivable American group automatically included. The Act itself refers to "the groups with which the center is concerned," "the communities being served by the center" - which indicates that choices can be made. In practice, the choices are made on the basis of which groups push for inclusion. In Senate Report 92-346 describing legislative intent on the Ethnic Heritage Act, acknowledging "limited resources," says that "every group and every project may not receive immediate attention."

Questions for the Jewish community:

. Do the Jews want to be included in the Center, with respect to materials relating to (any of) "the history, geography, society, economy, literature, art, music, drama, language and general culture" of the Jews?

. Do the Jews want to be included as a separate category - or merely to be thrown in with "other whites?" Will the practical effect of the latter option serve to downgrade the Jewish materials - since there is an "ethnic politics" involved.

. What curriculum materials should the Jews choose in order to make a distinction between "ethnic" materials and "religious" materials, which latter raises traditional questions about church-state separation?

Situation 2: Jewish Social Agencies.

. A Jewish summer camp in the S.F. area is part of a general program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture in which certain foods are provided at minimal cost. The U.S.D.A. now requires declarations that facilities are open to everyone, regardless of "race, color or national origin."

. The United Fund and UBAC organizations in the area are developing policies which call for employment and promotion of persons "regardless of their race, color, creed, national origin, age or sex relation to the requirements of the position for which he or she is being considered." There is an impetus to urge this policy on all beneficiary agencies of these organizations- which include Jewish Centers, Jewish Family Service Agencies, etc. From the same source, there is a push to have membership in beneficiary agencies open to all, and to have agency Boards become "representative" of the general community.

. A medical facility in the area, which receives some federal funds is required to indicate employment by "ethnic group" (the categories are roughly the same as those indicated in the multi-ethnic program above) - and is reviewed by the federal office of EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Council) towards the end of having the work force ethnically representative of the general community.

. An inquiry is made by UBAC as to whether a Jewish family service facility and a non-sectarian family service agency might merge, since they perform the "same function."

Questions for the Jewish Community:

. Does the Jewish community want to insist on the sectarian quality of its social agencies (Centers, Family Service Agency, children's home, Home for the Aged, Hospital)?

. What does this sectarian quality require with respect to "open employment," "open membership" and "Representative Board" policies?

. Do these agencies then want to be exempted from the various ethnic categorization reports which are increasingly required by governmental and UBAC type bureaus; or do they just want to be categorized as sectarian agencies, and have their reports reflect the Jews as a separate category? If the latter, do they want such a "Jewish" category only for Jewish social agencies?

Situation 3: Employment and Ethnicity

. The California State Personnel Board generates a piece of state legislation which would, for "affirmative action" purposes, require "ethnic identification" on all application forms (and permit it for local civil service jurisdictions). The categories would be roughly the same as those indicated above, with Jews presumably included not explicitly but as part of "Other Whites."

. The EEOC requires most business firms of any size to report employment by ethnic categories (same as above), in order to show adequate affirmative action towards ethnic representation reflecting the general community. One smaller financial institution insists on including a specific category for "Jews", on

grounds that the Jews are not proportionately reflected in financial institutions generally.

Questions for the Jewish Community:

. Jews have a security stake in the advancement of equal opportunity and employment status for the disadvantaged racial groups in America. (The stake, if nothing else, lies in the depolarization of racial tensions in the country; thus, preventing the growth of the kind of political extremism which has been the main generator of political anti-semitism and the main danger to Jewish security in the modern world). Requiring employers to make periodic "ethnic and racial reports" has been a powerful stimulus towards making employers, in fact, implement equal opportunity programs (although it has also led to abuses). Under those circumstances, does the Jewish community want to oppose all "ethnic categorization" programs as they apply to employment? Or does the Jewish community just want to try to build in the safeguards which will prevent as many abuses as possible?

. Since these ethnic categorization programs are now an institutionalized practice in America, do the Jews want to be included, in any given situation, as a separate "ethnic category?"

The Common Threads

There are certain common threads running through these different kinds of situations, and the questions they raise. As a result, the various questions should be answered by the various Jewish agencies involved in ways that are consistent with each other, and that relate consistently to the overarching public policy questions for the Jewish community:

. How do the Jews in America perceive themselves and want to be perceived: as an ethnic group, a religious group, or what?

. In which public or private spheres do the Jews want to be considered, - or not considered - as an ethnic group, religious group, or whatever?

. What kind of an American society do the Jews want to see develop, with respect to pluralism?

### Some Definition Problems

#### "Ethnic": What do we want to be?

The working definition of "ethnic" is changing, so that old standard dictionary definitions are not very helpful. It is a Greek origin word simply meaning "a people", as does the corresponding Latin origin word, "nation." They both mean something different than "political state" - so that people who hold allegiance to a single political state can be of different "ethnic" or "nationality" groupings. Ethnic also means something different than "race", although the racial and ethnic boundaries of a group can sometimes be the same. But there is no exact definition - by anthropologists, sociologists or anybody - as to what constitutes a distinct population group that can be called "ethnic" - and the working definitions keep changing.

(There is indeed an old dictionary definition which says that "ethnic" means "gentile" (non-Jewish\_ -- because the word gentile itself originally comes from a base meaning the same as "ethnic" and "nation", that is, "people" -- and the word was used biblically to refer to all non-Jews.)

The Encyclopedia of Social Sciences has this general definition: "An ethnic group is a distinct category of the population in a larger society whose culture is usually different from its own. The members of such a group are, or feel themselves, or are thought to be bound together by common ties of race or nationality or culture."

In Senate Report 92-346, there are these "defining" paragraphs:

"The concept of ethnic studies and ethnic groups extends beyond the traditional meaning given to immigration patterns in America. Indian, Black, Puerto Rican, Asian and other groups of people sharing a common history, identity, culture or experience in America, are meant to be included as well as the various European immigration groups more commonly referred to in the term "ethnic group."

"A definition provided by one witness at the hearings provides an example of the breadth of interpretation to be given to the concept of ethnic groups and ethnic studies: 'Ethnic groups would mean ethnic nationality, cultural, historical, racial, or groups whose members define themselves as a people claiming historic peoplehood..' Another relevant attempt at defining 'ethnic group' referred to groups 'distinctive as sub-cultural groups within the national society by virtue of race, religion, language or national origin.'" Any precise definition runs the risk of unintentioned exclusion, but these comments should provide a general operating guideline for the scope of ethnic representation envisioned in the act."

And the Jews as an ethnic group?

By this kind of definition, the Jews of America officially qualify as an ethnic group ("sharing a common history, identity, culture, or experience in America....." ..... "claiming historic peoplehood....").

It should be noted that ethnicity is defined in relationship to a specific society. Thus, in Israel, Western and Eastern Jews are generally accounted as two different ethnic groups. In America, an ethnic differentiation among Jews might have been made once, but has largely disappeared. Now, it is the Jews as a whole in America who "share a common history, identity," which distinguishes them from other sub-groups.

It should also be noted that while "religion" was mentioned in one definition, it has not yet qualified as a sufficient condition in itself for ethnic status. Perhaps, practically speaking, some practical curb is put on the proliferation of ethnic groups by the generally accepted fact that, besides being an American, one can only seriously identify with one ethnic group at a time. So, in practice, while Catholicism is part of the ethnicity of the American Irish - their Irishness (historically, culturally) distinguishes them from Italians more than their Catholicism makes them common. (Indeed Irish Catholicism is ethnically different from Italian Catholicism). So, the Irish, Italians and Poles are considered "ethnic groups"; the Catholics are not; nor are the Protestants as such.

The problem with the Jews is that they comprise a group whose nature is unlike almost any other "ethnic group" in America. Their religion and their ethnic identity (at least, their common history, the most dominant element in Jewish ethnicity) have the same boundaries. Just as the American Black's race and common history have the same bounds). The Mennonites in America probably come closest in this country to approximating the situation of the Jews --- but the same practical problems are not presented because the Mennonites are so thoroughly self-ghettoized and insulated.

(Another confusion: Israel does not add a dimension of ethnicity to American Jews, in the same sense that Italy does for American-Italians, Ireland does for American-Irish, etc. That is, Israel is not the "national origin" of most American Jews. Although Israel has, in practice, added an ethnic emphasis to American Jewish life in terms of the rebirth of Hebrew, the main ingredient which Israel adds is merely (although very dramatically) to intensify the sense of common history and historic peoplehood which was always a part of American Jewish identity.

(The Hitlerian oppression did the same, and so does the Soviet oppression of Jews).

So, when, in the eyes of official America, are the Jews a "religion" and when an "ethnic group?" The Jews are a religion "plus." The "plus" is ethnicity, related as it may centrally be to religion. The ethnic dimension is partly cultural - not in terms of chopped liver, not even just in terms of common literature, but most commonly in terms of family style and values - and communal style and values. The ethnic dimension is perhaps most clear in terms of common historical bonds and experiences. The maintenance of Jewish communal institutions (other than specifically religious institutions such as synagogues) is such an ethnic manifestation. The desire to impress some experiences and lessons of Jewish history on the consciousness of others (such as the Nazi experience) is also an ethnic impulse. The desire to especially help oppressed Jews, beyond helping all oppressed people, is an ethnic impulse.

One other note must be struck in the practical and political problem of ethnicity in America. There is often a tendency to assume in practice that the only deserving ethnic groups in America are disadvantaged ethnic groups. That is dealt with in the next section.

"Pluralism" - What do we want America to be?

"Pluralism" is about as loose a term as "Ethnic." In general, there are three different levels on which the term is used: 1) Pluralism, meaning a society in which there are many different intermediary groups (labor unions, business associations, religious groups, regional groups, etc.) which negotiate with each other for power; this pluralism is the opposite of totalitarianism, which does not allow any intermediary groups between the state and the individual; 2) Pluralism, meaning a society in which different ideas and points of view are tolerated; 3) Pluralism in which many different ethnic styles exist.

It is, of course, the last sense which is pertinent. But, even within that framework, ethnic pluralism has meant and can mean quite different things:

- 1) A society in which different ethnic groups have a high degree of assigned state power, have legal rights, as groups, have a degree of self-determination, control their own educational institutions, etc. Switzerland is one kind of example, Canada is another. In Switzerland, four different ethnic groups have specific legal rights - and four different languages have parity as official languages. The French Canadians run their institutions, the British Canadians theirs. In its various versions, this might be called ethnic political pluralism.
- 2) A society in which ethnic groups do not have political rights as such, but in which the private institutions of the ethnic groups are tolerated and flourish on a voluntary basis. To put it another way, there is a common culture in which all participate - and individuals, in whom the basic rights' inhere rather than in groups - choose to express themselves in certain ways through their own ethnic groups. Society has a laissez-faire attitude towards these groups. This might be called ethnic cultural pluralism.

But there is always a qualifier to this laissez-faire state attitude. Such ethnic cultural pluralism normally has a number of ethnic sub-cultures existing within a common, dominant culture. This dominant culture is readily accepted by the ethnic sub-cultures as the common culture within which the transactions of the society will take place among all: that is, the dominant language will be learned by all and used by all. Only insofar as there is such a transactional common culture, can individual freedom and mobility flourish. But beyond maintaining the transactional necessities in the common culture, society does not officially press its common culture, or restrict ethnic sub-cultures.

America and Pluralism:

America's pluralism has been, of course, of the ethnic-cultural rather than of the ethnic-political variety. Ethnic groups do not have legal rights in America. All rights inhere in the individual. The "rights" of the ethnic groups are derivative: They result from the rights of the individual to freely associate.

America has basically had a laissez-faire attitude towards ethnic groups, within the framework of maintaining the transactional primacy of the common culture. Most states have mandated that English be the sole or primary language of instruction in the schools; and by and large, English is the legal law of the land. In the schools, curricular materials have by and large also emphasized certain transactional aspects of the common culture. This met with the desire of immigrants to become integrated in general American economy and life -- while maintaining their ethnic ways and institutions in the private sphere. The American society has traditionally been laissez-faire with respect to these private ethnic institutions.

The "melting pot" question is another kind of question: what would this laissez-faire attitude mean for the ethnic groups: would they disappear as such. It was never felt that they would disappear as a result of any official acts of government - but that perhaps the natural forces in America (urbanization, etc.) would result in that disappearance. The question as to whether this was "good" or "bad" was always an academic question in political terms, because no one ever talked about the American government doing anything about it one way or another.

The Current Scene in America and Pluralism

There seem to be two new developments in America - or two aspects of one development. This development started, of course, in the civil-rights affirmative action context;

and proceeded through three initial stages of logic: 1) Equal opportunity has been denied many individuals and must be made available to everyone; 2) Black individuals in particular have been denied that equal opportunity in America; and as a result, the Black group is statistically stamped with the disabling results of that long-time disadvantage, even with the introduction of equal opportunity; Therefore, the Black group is a practical point of focus for applying remedial and compensatory measures to large numbers of Black individuals to whom this society owes some special attention.

From that point, certain other developments took place: 1) As part of a needed drive for self-dignity, the Black community began to develop concepts of Black ethnicity and black self-determination; 2) Other ethnic groups (and some non-ethnic groups) began to develop the same concepts; 3) There began to develop demands for rights which approximated "group rights" - i.e., proportional representation in employment, in politics, etc., community-controlled institutions. 4) Out of this have come some demands for breaking up the transactional common culture; for more than one official language in the schools and elsewhere; 5) There has been a promotion of "white ethnic groups" - Americans of Italian, Polish, etc. ancestry, demanding a "new pluralism" all around.

#### Possible Courses for American Pluralism and Implications for Jews

These two polar scenarios could develop as a result of the above developments:

##### 1 - America turns into an ethnic-political society

The latterday trends towards groupification become crystallized. Legal rights begin to be assigned to groups as such, first on a de facto, then on a de jure basis. Different groups are allowed to go to and run different school systems. With public money. Each group has the right to set its own curriculum, and use its own language. Different languages are given official

status. Civil service assigns a certain number of jobs to each group; and delegates to each group the task of setting up a qualifying list from each group. Etc.

Implications for the Jews: A reduction of the individual in America not only sharply downgrades Jewish participation and status in America; but also sets up a group-power politics which threatens directly the security of the American Jew.

2 - America turns from pluralism to monism

The apparent trends towards groupification, towards an ethnic-political society are an illusion. Something else is happening under that surface; to wit:

There is no real ethnic renaissance. Note the prevalent working belief that only the disadvantaged ethnic groups are legitimate ethnic groups. Note the initial resistance to Jewish participation in ethnic center programs. ("The Jews have already made it. Give the others a chance.") Senate Report 92-346 suggests a system of priorities with respect to groups. Note the fact that the ethnic classifications used in the employment programs suggest these priorities, (disadvantaged groups) - and that they are the same groups which emerge first on ethnic studies programs. The black ethnic drive was really a political drive whose purpose was to obtain equal rights for Black individuals. Although, as a result, there has developed an ethnic profession, and ethnic studies professionals who have a vested interest in maintaining separatist groups - the basic drive is still for equal individual rights. The "white ethnic" groups are playing a political counter-game, but most of them are really continuing to lose their ethnic force, generation by generation. (Even the talk about the "white ethnics"

tends to concentrate on low-income, still-disadvantaged white ethnics). The premise is that when these groups are no longer disadvantaged, everyone should stop being particularistic.

In that case, the significance of the current developments is not so much the development of the concept of groupification, as the development of a concept of parity (absolute equality as distinct from equal opportunity). This is the significance of groups now "getting into the affirmative action act, which are not ethnic groups at all: e.g., women, homosexuals. It is the real significance of the quota system. It is the significance of the dictum of Supreme Court Justice Douglas in the De Funis case, which has caught so many people's fancy: affirmative action not by race but by previous condition of ancestral poverty and disadvantage, etc.

In that case, the tendency of current developments is to minimize the merit system, but finally on the basis of parity, not on the basis of group rights (which is just an interim political phase).

Implications for the Jews:

This direction away from voluntary cultural pluralism is another kind of departure from an individual merit system which would serve to downgrade Jewish participation and status in America; but more than that, would minimize the American emphasis on individual freedom, being totalitoid in nature, and would threaten the traditional security of the American Jew. Concurrently, this direction would tend to isolate the Jewish group, raise questions about the legitimacy of the ethnic Jewish community, and cause hostility towards the stubborn ethnicity of the Jew. (There are already warning signs of that).

Overall Directions for the Jewish Community

Out of this overview, this basic premise is suggested: The public policy direction of the Jewish community in general should be towards trying to maintain a voluntary ethnic-cultural society, as opposed to the two polar directions indicated above. This means an insistence on the legitimacy of the Jewish ethnic existence in the private sphere, while insisting on the maintenance of the primacy of individual rights in the public and common sphere of American life. Somewhat more specifically, this premise would dictate the following directions:

- 1 - An insistence on maintaining the sectarian nature of the Jewish communal institutions now in existence.
  
- 2 - An insistence on employment, and membership policies which are consistent with that sectarianism. This means, in practice, work-related criteria for employment. Thus, for key policy and program posts, people who have a strong knowledge of, identification with, commitment to Jewish life should be at least disproportionately represented. Positions which do not require that knowledge, identification or commitment, should not be restricted to Jews. The same kind of criteria should apply to Board members. Admission and membership, depending upon the kind of institution, should follow the same principle, according to the specific needs of that institution to maintain its sectarian character - which certainly means some disproportionate openness to Jewish constituency.
  
- 3 - An insistence that government make some accommodation to the sectarian nature of private Jewish institutions. Without some accommodation, the neutrality of government could be a "neutrality-against", rather than an even-handed neutrality. It is the kind of accommodation we ask the public

schools to make, in not scheduling major tests on Rosh Hashonah, although we do not want them to make Rosh Hashonah a school holiday.

The critical focus, in accommodation, is to accommodate to the individuals who want to identify with private Jewish institutions, rather than to the institutions themselves. This, incidentally, would require some view of the question as to whether government should make some accommodation to the children of Catholic schools. The distinction here is that government funds would not go to the general support of such a school, but could go for certain purposes to children who wish to attend those schools for free lunches, for example. This is now, of course, a fact of life, anyway; but the Jewish community is still uneasy about it, and should review that uneasiness in the light of new developments in America.

4 - The general safeguard against accommodation spilling over into official support, or "neutrality-for", is a concomitant insistence on maintaining the mainstream common culture and institutions. That would mean, for example, an insistence on maintaining English as the official language of the schools; on bi-lingual programs being designed to help children to read English rather than establishing an alternate official language; on supporting and maintaining a strong public school system - i.e., providing Jewish day schools for those families that are so inclined, rather than taking action which would promote the idea that all Jewish children should normatively attend Jewish day schools; on not creating or expanding Jewish social agencies where there is no traditional Jewish dimension and common institutions will serve the purpose. (a rule-of-thumb in the difficult business of drawing the line between official accommodation and official support: the Jewish community must itself be

primarily responsible for the strength of its own ethnic institutions. The government must not be asked to be responsible for that).

5 - An insistence on school ethnic centers being truly "multi-ethnic" centers with respect to the materials etc., rather than a center for "disadvantaged minorities." An insistence that, within this framework, Jewish materials and emphases be included, relative to history and culture.

6 - A de-emphasis of ethnic categorization in general, especially as it flows from the government. An insistence on affirmative action programs whose emphasis is in the direction of individual merit, not in the direction of either group rights or the principle of individual parity.