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WESTERING AND THE JEWISH CONNECTION

There is an abundance of clichés about the character of the American West. Most of them are true. And most of them apply to the American Jew, only more so. The West is the American Jewish frontier, with all the negatives and positives that implies. For the Jewish community, the negatives are particularly troublesome, and the positives have not yet been realized.

For America, the frontier meant a change in life style for those *living* in the West -- and so with the Jews. But, the frontier also meant, eventually, a Western impact on the life style of the entire country. That has not yet happened to the Jewish community -- but it will happen, if it is not inhibited. The Jewish society is in some ways a more deliberate society than the general American society, and changes in the Jewish society can be advanced or inhibited more deliberately.

Those descriptive clichés about the character of Western life initially fall into two categories, which might be connected by the term "dissociation." One category has to do with the fact of physical and social dispersion. A recent list of "Western Region Characteristics" prepared by the Western regional office of the UJA, included these typical phrases: "greater distances between communities," "remote from Eastern centers," "less relating among communities," "smaller communities more isolated." Charles Miller talks about "population spread." Ralph Kramer talks about "low population density" and uses the marvelous phrase, "non-place," in describing a characteristic of Western Jewry.

That phrase, "non-place," is redolent of Jewish history. Simon Dubnow decried the development of the Jewish people from a group with tribal ties, to a land-connected nation with broader values; and then to a "non-place" nation, without a land but with commonly binding values. A persistent question since then has been:

how long can a people survive without a "place?" And the Jews became increasingly "non-place" in history. Their ghettoized existence in much of the Middle Ages did provide places of an important sort. With the European "liberation," those places diminished in fact and in importance, but voluntary and involuntary constraints still provided a certain amount of place identity.

Indeed, there was a kind of Westering in all of this Jewish movement down through the centuries, always with the same implications. Halevi wrote in Europe, in the 12th century:

"My heart's in the East,
And I am in the ends of the West.
How then can I taste what I eat,
And how can food to me be sweet?"

It was in America, the further westering of the Jew, that the non-place dilemma became even more acute, with so many of the European constraints removed. Still, there were European-like densities. As Emerson said: "Europe stretches to the Alleghenies; America lies beyond." In the American West, the "non-place" phenomenon has become most acute.

The various characteristics of physical and social dispersion relate closely to the *other* category, that of deracination, the loss of cultural and spiritual roots.

That UJA list of Western Regional Characteristics uses phrases like "escapism," "individualism," "less Jewish intellectual environment," as well as "less roots." Elazar and others have described the prevalence of what they call attenuated religious practices in the West. And every casual observer has remarked on the relative diminution of Jewish "ethnicity" in the American West.

There could be much fruitless discussion about how much the physical and social dispersion caused the apparent thinning of religious and cultural roots; and how much it was a matter of people with thinner roots being attracted to the frontier spaces of the West. Both factors have obviously been at work, and interacting.

The term "dissociation" is useful to apply to the whole phenomenon, because it is generic enough to cover both sets of factors -- and because it is widely used to describe the genesis of some general social problems which bear a peculiar kind of comparison -- at least to begin with.

For example, dissociation is used to describe the nature of much loss of social control. It moves the emphasis away from individual pathology, to the social situation. It connotes the breakdown of traditional association, of traditional groups. We often talk about the Jewish community as a voluntary association. But much of general society is a voluntary association as well. For example, there is no police force large enough to maintain obedience to laws to which people are not somehow committed by internalized values. But those values are transmitted from groups to which the individual belongs and feels connected. When the individual no longer feels connected to that group, when that group no longer has a prime function for him, it no longer has the power to transmit values.

The individual loses his connection, and allegiance to the group under a number of typical circumstances: When the group no longer serves an important function for that individual; or when the group's values no longer seem to fit the real world; or when the real world presses conflicting values on the individual.

Such dissociation, for example, and consequent loss of social control, is seen as the cause of much anti-social behavior in the general community. Dissociation has often been cited as the explanation for certain patterns of erratic and exotic behavior in the American West. This happens, it has been pointed out, both because dissociating conditions, such as dispersion, exist in the West; and because dissociated individuals tend to come disproportionately to the West.

It is useful to apply this construct to the Jewish situation. We generally have the dissociation problems of fading group allegiance, and thinning lines of value and culture transmission. We have these problems for the same reason that the general society has them, and for special reasons of our own. We have them particularly in the West.

It is important to point out, however, that the problem of dissociation exists all over the country. It is just markedly more intense out here, in the West. Thus, not to be Pollyanna about it, this situation provides an opportunity as well as a special problem for the West. If we are the advanced arena for something that is happening to the Jewish community all over the country, then we are also a frontier laboratory for trying to find remedies that will apply to the Jewish community all over the country, as well as for ourselves.

Furthermore, dissociation has a flip side. It was always true that as Westerners came with, or developed thinner allegiances to, old institutions, customs and values, those who were not totally alienated were thereby in a position to create new institutions, customs and even new values that would fit the future world. This can be true of Western Jewry too -- within the limits of the ancient values which define our essence as a Jewish community. However, it is not clear that Western Jewry is yet taking this creative course. It is possible that we are not really westering, but, for example, are merely transferring to the West all of our Eastern institutional luggage.

If so, we will not only be failing to meet our own special needs in the West, but we will be failing to provide innovation which is needed by the whole of American Jewry.

After all, what are we talking about when we refer to "Jewish dissociation?" We are talking about the loss of the "Jewish Connection": the connection between the individual Jew and Jewish tradition; the connection between the individual Jew and Jewish values; the connection between the individual Jew and the Jewish community. The construct of "dissociation" merely describes the relationships among these failing connections, so that we will have a better perspective on what is happening to us, and what we can do about it. It moves us from the level of making pep talks about how everyone should shape up and be good Jews, to the underlying social conditions which tend to weaken the Jewish Connection. Incidentally, it also moves us from the level of glittering generalities about Jewish education. No one is seriously educated who is not motivated to learn, and that brings us again to the underlying social conditions which weaken the Jewish Connection.

Those "underlying social conditions" are partly created by the general society. But they are also created by the Jewish society, by the Jewish community. The Jewish Connection is the main business of the secular institutions of the Jewish community: to deter the process of dissociation -- and, more than that, to institute a process of resociation.

Within that framework, we can distinguish four kinds of objectives for the organized Jewish community. Three of those objectives are intimately connected: first, the sense of community itself, the sense of belonging and relating to a body of Jews; second, commitment to Jewish religious and communal values; and third, the provision of Jewish services. These objectives must, of course, mesh with each other in any program of resociation.

The fourth institutional objective, to put it bluntly, is "influence;" that is, the matter of Jewish external relations or community relations, whose purpose is to support those conditions in the general society which will allow the Jewish community and Jewish individuals to be Jewish without hindrance or penalty.

There has been much commentary on the effect of physical dispersion on Jewish external relations and security. To recapitulate briefly, this commentary starts with the undeniable proposition that Jewish security in this country depends primarily on the state of the American society and its institutions -- rather than on whether people think well of the Jews or not. The critical question is whether we have the kinds of safeguards and commitments which will protect Jewish rights even if a lot of people don't like us. In a mini-capsule, that distills the sum of our extensive modern knowledge about Jewish security.

That being the case, public affairs and public policy become the focus of Jewish security and external relations. From that point of view, the ability of the Jews to influence public policy becomes paramount. One of the well-publicized aspects of that ability-to-influence has been the matter of "voting power." But in 34 states, covering two-thirds of the U.S. Senate, the Jewish population is less than one per cent of the general population; and only in one state is it more than 10 per cent. The only way that Jewish "voting power" can be accounted important, even though Jews actually go to the polls in disproportionate numbers, is insofar as there are heavy concentrations of Jews in certain politically critical places, at times when there are close contests. But as Jews disperse, that concentration effect is lost.

And it should be noted that the ability of American Jews to help shape American public policy, not only affects American Jewish security, but also the other prime items on the Jewish external affairs agenda: the status of Jews abroad, including those in Israel.

Of course, Jews are politics-intensive not just in terms of voting, but in terms of general political activism -- for example, working for candidates. The nature of Jewish political activism may have to change in order to adapt to demographic changes. However, there are now indications that fundamental Jewish political involvement --

as distinct from crisis reaction -- has been diminishing somewhat. There are also concerns that an increasing number of Jews who are active in political life will not have a traditionally strong Jewish Connection. This subject, then, also has implications for Jewish institutional activity in the laboratory West.

To recapitulate, these four institutional objectives of the Jewish community -- sense of community, commitment to values, provision of services and external relations -- all face the national problem of Jewish dissociation, as it is especially intensified in the West by physical and social dispersion, and by the thinning of cultural and spiritual roots. What institutional avenues are indicated by these problems and this challenge?

Service Delivery

One avenue starts with the institutional objective of "services," under Western conditions. This aspect of westering has been addressed more than any other, and in past meetings of the Council of Jewish Federations. The themes have been the need for decentralization of services, and flexibility of service delivery. Morris Levin and others have talked about multi-service centers. We might take one cue from the American phenomenon resulting from general dispersion: that is, the scattered shopping centers instead of just the dense downtown center.

The image of multi-service centers, by the way, should probably be accompanied by the image of multi-service personnel. Jews are prone to over-doing the concept of professional specialization. Perhaps we can avoid scarring professional sensibilities by developing the concept of multi-service para-professionals.

But we might also take a cue from another modern phenomenon: the so-called "store-front" location, instead of the columned building. Thus, more adventurous police departments have set up store-front police stations in scattered neighborhoods. They do not provide all the services, but they provide at least a referral point, and,

most important, a presence. They also have the advantage that they can be picked up and moved, when circumstances warrant, without great expenditures of money or expanses of time.

There is another image to be added: that of the bookmobile -- or even that of the flying doctor in the Australian bush.

Many of these images and the need generally for decentralization and flexibility of service has already been the subject of much discussion and of some experimentation -- but they may all require some prior structural changes.

Regional Association

An ironic development has taken place in Jewish life, whereby a loss of "place" has been accompanied by a certain rise in local chauvinism.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, for example, the Jews, although in diaspora, had developed a certain sense of "place" in their various local communities in Europe. Each of these places typically had a coherent and stable Jewish society and sense of community. The local kehilla bound together the local residents, who lived closely side by side, and the various communal institutions of learning, welfare and service. But there were always individuals or small groups of Jews who lived in nearby villages. It was normally understood that the services and protection of the kehilla extended also to those living outside the kehilla area. However, when more formal institutions were established in American Jewish communities, at some point there developed a more particular sense of constituency -- and more dispersed Jews tended to be left out of the formal scheme of things.

Under the new conditions of dispersion represented by the West, it is not enough for the central places to occasionally extend their services as a matter of *noblesse oblige*. A sense of *community* must be extended over a wider space, and that will require some structural re-thinking.

This is not a matter of establishing national or regional umbrella mechanisms. This is a matter of establishing some kind of *functional* relationships within natural regions. The delicate need, indeed, is to develop some more formal regional associations, without violating local autonomy or whatever sense of place the local communities have been able to develop.

Daniel Elazar uses the term "federalism" to describe the social organization of Jews, from the time of the federation of the twelve tribes under Moses. That term, however, connotes a kind of formal super-organization, although the members of any federation presumably retain important elements of their own sovereignty. Perhaps an apter term for our purposes is "confederation," or even "consortium," which suggest that sovereign bodies merely have an agreement and a procedure for coming together and sharing whenever it is of mutual benefit. Those kehillot of the 17th century had no over-arching organization, but on an ad hoc basis they did have joint regional committees and projects on occasion.

There has been some experimentation with confederation or consortium approaches to regional association, particularly in the public affairs field. Northern California, for example, has about 16 Congressional districts, a convenient form of measurement since the one-man one-vote dictum. In other words, each of those districts not only has a Congressman, each district has the same number of people, and about the same number of children in schools.

But these 16 districts have quite disparate Jewish populations. There are 4 conventionally organized Jewish communities, whose jurisdiction extends to about 10 of those districts. Within those organized communities themselves, there are problems of dispersion. And, among these 4 organized communities, there are considerable differences of population, of level of organization and organizational capacity. In addition, there are about a half dozen districts with small-to-miniscule Jewish populations and levels of organization.

Within this region a minimal public affairs consortium was established among the 4 organized communities, key Jews from some of the unorganized districts, and the regional offices of national public affairs agencies. Subsequently, there has been some composite attention to all 16 Congressmen on pertinent issues. A communications network has been established. Some of these districts have joined in common projects, such as the production and distribution of short-form religious calendars to the schools. Some common lists have been established for Action Alerts and the like. Resources, such as speakers and exhibits, have been shared. Certain joint projects with respect to the mass media have been undertaken. In short, just enough has been cautiously accomplished to indicate that this is a road which should be travelled. But it is necessary for a stronger, more explicit regional association to be established, within a wider context than just public affairs.

In short, there is emerging the need for two different levels of functional organization. On the one hand, there is the central community, whose westering requirements probably call for a *looser* approach, a degree of decentralization, in the fashion described earlier. On the other hand, for *regions*, there is the need for a somewhat *tighter* approach, a degree of confederation or consortium. Both address the problem of physical and social dispersion; and of the need for resociation. But they are two quite different organizational forms, suited for different purposes. It would be dysfunctional for a local community, even with *its* dispersion problems, to organize too loosely around the model of the functional region. That would be destructively and uneconomically fragmenting. Larger metropolitan areas particularly have the problem of finding a balance between looser and tighter construction, that will keep them on this side of the functional region model.

And it would be dysfunctional, as well as futile, to attempt to create too tight a regional association, along the lines of the local community model.

It would also be a mistake to try to define functional region too ambitiously. The ideal natural region, for this purpose, would have certain manageable distances, as well as certain common cultural and even political characteristics.

There is, of course, a third level of organization which is essentially administrative, rather than functional in nature. *The West*, for example, is an entity for certain administrative and coordinative purposes. But it obviously does not lend itself to the kind of functional service delivery, or sharing, or joint problem-solving that is possible in a functional region.

Some "natural regions" should be identified for pilot programs along these lines. Of course, it would be surprising if different patterns did not emerge, some western regions being more or less natural, more or less functional.

At the same time, the principle of communal integrity and autonomy should not be destroyed in the course of either decentralizing local institutions, or of drawing together regional communities. This matter of local integrity deserves a special comment from the Western perspective.

Pluralism and Local Integrity

Even without the Jews of New York City and without the Jews of Los Angeles, the rest of American Jewry is a quarter of the Jews in the world, the largest single body of Jewry in the world -- larger than that of Israel, or of the Soviet Union, or of all Europe, or of New York City and Los Angeles combined. In short, it is a highly significant body of Jewry that is scattered around in the United States.

If the national Jewish community is going to be concerned with battling Jewish dissociation, and building up the Jewish Connection in America, then the national community will have to be more concerned with the autonomy and significance of those local communities which are scattered around the nation. It is in the local Jewish communities that Jewish individuals get their most immediate sense of place and connection.

This has something to do with what has been called the "New York syndrome," whereby nothing of importance is deemed to happen much west of the 75th longitude. But there is more to it than that. The New York syndrome is not necessarily restricted to New York. It is a headquarters syndrome; it is a function not just of large population concentrations in certain cities, but of the existence of organizational headquarters in those cities.

To cite just one illustration: By chance, some of you may have heard of the Andrew Young Affair, and the little discussion that ensued with respect to Black-Jewish relations. Well, Black-Jewish relations at the headquarters level, and Black-Jewish relations at the working community level are two quite different matters. The problems are different, the issues are different, the relationships are different. A statement was prepared by a coalition of national Jewish headquarters offices, and released to local newspapers around the country. A number of local Jewish communities would have liked a somewhat different formulation for their purposes. But they were not consulted until after the national statement was issued from New York. Without blowing this incident itself out of proportion, it was symptomatic of a pervasive problem.

The answer is to develop a more conscious pattern of pluralism among the local communities of this country, which will, of course, take into account the special weight which must be given to and the special leadership which must be exercised by places like New York and Los Angeles. The need for a more conscious pluralism is sharpened by the population shift in general and by the population shift to the West in particular.

The West has the opportunity to show the way, first by providing a model. One practical way to provide this model is for the large cities of the West to help establish functional regions in their particular areas, and to pursue a policy of pluralism within those associations.

This will, of course, require the larger communities to take on a special sense of responsibility and to eschew chauvinism. Otherwise they will not have westered, but will only have transferred the so-called New York complex to the West, which is not the same thing at all -- and the general process of Jewish dissociation will, to that extent, proceed apace. That is not in the enlightened self-interest of any of us. The same prescription would apply to the smaller communities, whose psychological problem would be to avoid preconceived paranoia.

During the process of building such a sense of pluralism in the West, the West will be in a position to bring the point home to the headquarters enclave in the East.

Individual Participation

The phenomenon of dissociation carries with it the image of increasing numbers of individuals without a Jewish connection. The preliminary results of a recent survey in one middle-sized Western city indicate that a significantly large proportion of *Federation-givers* belong to neither a synagogue nor any Jewish organization.

There are several notes to be struck on that point. First of all, there is the less-requires-more rule. For purposes of the Jewish Connection, the higher the concentration of Jews, the less important is specific organizational membership. To use an extreme example, Jews in Israel don't need membership in Jewish organizations to make the Jewish Connection. To a qualitatively different degree, the same is true in New York City. But with dispersion, a specific organizational connection becomes more important. Just being on the "giver" rolls of a Federation does not do it any more than just being on the "occasional observer" rolls of a synagogue. As a matter of fact, just being on the membership rolls of an organization does not do it by itself. In addition, with dispersion and the growing welfare state, we may find fewer Jews making their connection through communal services. And, finally, there is a growing disinclination among younger Jews, and particularly those in some state of partial dissociation, to easily join a Jewish organization.

In short, there is a special problem of individual participation which challenges the West and its adaptive ability. Again the theme is some form of decentralization. Our traditional organizations have sometimes become too rigid, too bureaucratized, even too professionalized for this purpose. Certainly in the public affairs field, it is necessary to de-emphasize the function of our agencies as authoritative spokesmen; and to re-emphasize their function as the training ground for individuals acting more autonomously in the public arena. To put it another way, if the organizations are to be points of connection, they may have to handle that connection more loosely -- turning more towards being a network of connected individuals, than just a body of people supporting an authoritative agency. The idea of an action corps of fairly autonomous people, acting in a network system, may be adaptable in a number of different institutional settings.

Of course, the subject of greater individual participation has been given a lot of thought by a lot of people in the Jewish community. It is fatuous to say that more imaginative approaches are needed. But it is a little less fatuous to say that such participatory plans will probably succeed to the extent that they are mounted outside the traditional organizational lines, and along more individualized lines. It would be the better part of westering to do just that.

Adult Jewish Education

The characteristics of dissociation suggest both the special need for Jewish education, and a special hindrance to it. We are not now talking about the need to provide Jewish education to those who already feel the Jewish Connection strongly. We are talking about reaching the fairly unreached, about making the Jewish Connection directly.

This is not, of course, a new subject for Jewish educators -- but it has a strong westering implication, and should be mentioned here as perhaps an important "service" laboratory for some of the matters which we have been discussing.

For this purpose, let us construct some classes of people within the spectrum of association; that is, from association to dissociation. Without trying to build too many sub-groups of non-existent types, we can draw just two marks on that spectrum and talk about three large classes of people. At one end of the spectrum, there are the Seceders. They have rather deliberately withdrawn from Jewish identification, although some of them may still root for Israel when they read the morning papers. At the other end of the spectrum are the Members. They actively participate in one way or another. In the middle are the Fellow-Travellers. They have no interest in denying their Jewish identity, but they find it somewhat irrelevant to their lives. Many of them make a Federation gift, if approached; some of them may even attend High Holy Day services for a couple of hours; but otherwise they disappear.

Over the years, there has been a shift on this spectrum, in the direction of dissociation, and it can be seen in its most pronounced form in the West.

It might make sense for the organized Jewish community to ignore the Seceders. Maybe history can do something about them, but our only tools are the institutions of the Jewish community, and they do not reach the Seceders. We must be concerned about the full Members because they need and deserve attention and service, and they need them under the dispersed conditions of the West. And we must be concerned about the Fellow-Travellers, the category which may have been growing the fastest. They are more open to us than we may think. It is some of them who might be attracted by possibilities of individual participation which are outside traditional organizational lines. And it is some of them who would be most attracted by educational efforts which are outside traditional organizational lines.

For them, a less formal level of education is indicated. A general *climate* of Jewish learning has to be established, with its presence widespread. At the local level of dispersion, the image of the store-front and the bookmobile should be invoked. At the level of the functional region, the image of the flying Jewish educator should

be invoked. We must look for ways in which the connection can be re-instituted on an individual basis; and then perhaps, on a small group basis. That, too, would be westering.

A Russian sociologist, Peter Struve, before 1917, wrote: "Every attempt to identify the content and the form of the (community) spirit with one constant principle is liable to stunt its growth, to petrify and fix its content ... The (community) spirit continues to develop in the workshop of (community) life."

The West is the prime workshop of American Jewish community life. It is so not because it is qualitatively different from the East, but precisely because it is so much like the East, only more so. It is, at the least, a window into the future of American Jewish life. But it is also, theoretically, still more capable of making adaptive institutional changes than the East. These institutional changes have to face the problems of dissociation. They have to promote resociation by specific efforts to emphasize the individual, and de-emphasize the formal organizations; by specific efforts to combine decentralization with more functional association and pluralism.

The workshop results cannot be anticipated -- but they could be important not just for us, but for the entire national Jewish community -- and for the well-being of the Jewish Connection.

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