

## Hold the Eulogy, Jewish Renaissance on the Rise

*Sidney Schwarz*

Israel Friedlaender's classic essay, "The Problem of Judaism in America," published in 1907, brings to mind the famous French saying: "the more things change, the more things stay the same." Friedlaender wrestles with the challenge that modernity poses to Jewish identity in the early part of the twentieth century. He notes, along with the classic Zionists, that the acceptance of Jews in western societies and their relative socio-economic success is no less a threat to Jewish survival than the persecution and anti-Semitism of Europe. While the latter threatened Jewish lives and safety because of hostile forces outside of the Jewish community, the former challenged Judaism from within.

It is humbling to consider how many thousands of articles and books, addressing this very problem, have been written in the 100 years since Friedlaender's essay. During Friedlaender's time, the way this dilemma was understood was considering "the problem of the Jews" (physical threats to their survival in Europe and how Jews might be saved) and "the problem of Judaism" (offering a program of Jewish life that would be compelling enough that even Jews who faced no threats to their existence would voluntarily identify with Judaism and the Jewish community). Ahad Ha'am framed this as the contest between political Zionism and spiritual Zionism.

It needs to be noted that throughout the last century, the vast majority of Jewish communal energy was expended on the program of "political Zionism," not only in Israel, but in the entire Jewish world. Because "Zionism" has fallen into disfavor in most contemporary Jewish contexts,

this program has carried other labels. "Ethnic-survivalism" is probably the best way to label this approach to Jewish life and community—it is characterized by a focus on the safety and security of the state of Israel, attention to the health, welfare and safety of Jewish communities around the world and vigilance against any manifestations of anti-Semitism at home or abroad. Given both the socio-economic status of American Jewry and its unparalleled political influence, the Jewish community has been able to effect this agenda with impressive success.

I am intimately familiar with the contours of this agenda. As the executive director of the Jewish Community Council of Greater Washington DC (1984–88), I carried the responsibility for the central parts of the ethnic-survivalist agenda (e.g., Israel, anti-Semitism, oppressed Jewish communities). I believe deeply in that agenda and it is still central to my personal Jewish identity. At the same time, it was clear to me then, as it is to me today, that it is not an agenda that motivates a post-Holocaust generation into a strong and positive identification with Judaism and the Jewish community. Indeed, all of the evidence points to the fact that this generation is essentially post-tribal. That which smacks of parochialism and insularity is instantly suspect in the eyes of a vast majority of non-Orthodox Jews under the age of fifty.

Increasingly, the question that I find younger Jews asking is not: "How do I survive anti-Semitism" but rather, "Why should I bother to identify as a Jew at all?" It was in response to this latter question that I spent a good deal of energy developing a new paradigm for the American synagogue (outlined in my book, *Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of Jews Can Transform the American Synagogue*, Jossey-Bass, 2000) and creating programs that integrated Jewish learning, values and social responsibility under the aegis of PANIM: The Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values.

I have certainly not been alone in calling for new priorities in the Jewish community. The very fact that the United Jewish Communities has devoted one of its three pillars to "Renaissance and Renewal" points to the fact that this transformation of agendas is well underway. Yet it needs to be acknowledged that the old agenda does not fade away quite so quickly. The unraveling of the Oslo peace process, and the outbreak of

Intifada II in Israel, coupled with the emergence of Al Qaeda and an international program seeking to delegitimize Zionism, democracy and all things western have shaken the confidence of those, like me, who said that it is time for Jews to stop focusing on a reactionary agenda and get on with the business of creating a positive program for Jewish life. It is appropriate and logical for any ethnic or religious group to focus its energies on threats to its very physical survival before it focuses on upgrading the content of its cultural or spiritual life. But there are inherent risks to this approach as well.

In Israel, there are those who have long challenged the country to live up to one of the commitments expressed in the country's Declaration of Independence—creating a society based on the principles of justice and peace expressed by the biblical prophets. It is a standard against which Israeli society falls far short. Witness the ever-growing gap between rich and poor; the rift between religious and secular Jews; the failure to cultivate a love of Judaism among those Israelis who resent the power of the Orthodox rabbinate in the country; a lack of responsible stewardship for the ecological health of the land; finding a way to extend full equality to Israeli Arabs; providing security for Israelis without totally delegitimizing the aspirations of Palestinians living under Israeli control. These and other issues have been perpetually “deferred” by political leaders in Israel because of the larger concerns about Israel's security. Indeed, the vast majority of Israelis would concur with the prioritization implicit in such choices.

An honest assessment of the health of American Judaism reveals an even more dire picture. Most synagogues are experiencing an aging and graying of their memberships. Synagogue schools continue to have an abysmal record when it comes to producing literate and knowledgeable Jews. The programs that once took thousands of teens to Israel for group summer trips and resulted in a surge of Jewish pride and identity have all but vanished due to security concerns. Federations across the country and their beneficiary agencies, which are the backbone of the organized Jewish community, are having a hard time replacing their aging donor base and are engaged in belt tightening and staff cuts. The 2000 National Jewish Population Study confirms that younger adult cohorts of Jews have a lower emotional attachment to Israel and a lower level of loyalty to the organized

Jewish community than their older counterparts. Unless reversed, this demographic trend does not bode well for the future of the American Jewish community.

The generational divide between Jews over the age of fifty who have a more direct connection with the State of Israel and younger Jews who do not cannot be overstated. The older generation grew up with a strong image of Israel as the heroic David against the Goliath of enemy Arab nations who sought Israel's destruction. Among the younger generation, the image since Israel's invasion of Lebanon in the early 1980's has been much more of an occupying power victimizing stateless Palestinians. The Jewish community has succeeded in training a leadership cadre of younger Jews to make the case for Israel's legitimacy and to respond to ongoing efforts to delegitimize the Zionist enterprise, but that subset is but a small fraction of their generational cohort. One of the contributing factors to the shrinking Jewish donor base in the organized Jewish community is the fact that Israel was long the engine which powered the fundraising machinery of the Jewish community. That engine has considerably less appeal to younger Jews today and the community has not yet figured out what, if anything, can replace it.

In considering a programmatic response to the above-outlined “problem of Judaism in America,” we are challenged to find a program to replace the ethnic/survivalist agenda which has served the American Jewish community so well for half a century. Despite the well-rehearsed problems facing American Judaism today, there are the beginnings of some very positive developments in the Jewish world. Taken as a whole, the areas of promise actually announce the agenda which needs to be the centerpiece for the next 100 years of Jewish life.

Ironically, the new agenda is defined by a classic text from the Mishnah which tells us that the world stands on three pillars—*Torah*, *Avodah* and *Gemilut Hasadim* (Avot 1:2). Those three pillars, identified by rabbinic sages who lived in a time and place very distant from our own, nevertheless represent three areas of activity that have tremendous appeal to a younger generation of American Jews. I want to indicate how each of these three pillars represents the seeds of an exciting renaissance of Judaism for the twenty-first century.

### Torah

Torah represents Jewish learning. For the most part, Jews under the age of fifty were poorly served by their afternoon Jewish education. Short attention spans in the afternoon hours, the challenge of finding quality teachers and the lack of reinforcement in the homes were all factors that undermined the well-intentioned efforts of those who worked hard (and continue to do so even today) to provide basic Jewish education to the typical American Jewish child who attends public school.

The products of those schools, when they became adults, had several choices. Some disassociated themselves from Jewish community and identity, chose not to join synagogues or Jewish organizations, not to raise their children with any form of Jewish education, and assimilated into the American mainstream culture. A second group retained some residual loyalty to the Jewish community and decided to join synagogues and put their children into afternoon schools, not unlike the ones they attended. Most had little passion for this decision, seeing it instead as a necessary, if unpleasant, requirement to enable their children to celebrate their bar/bat mitzvah at age thirteen. A handful had enough positive experiences in their upbringing from some combination of family, schooling, youth movements, camps and Israel experiences that they became deeply committed to Jewish life and institutions.

It is hard to fault the Jews who concluded that Judaism was childish and unsophisticated based on their early exposure to Torah. While we cannot undo the past, we can take a close look at the children who are currently in the Jewish educational system, both in afternoon schools and in day schools and engage the most creative minds available to make those experiences rich and meaningful. What will increase the chances that this happens is if more Jewish adults begin to be engaged themselves in programs of serious Jewish study.

There is evidence that a significant percentage of Jewish adults are prepared to give Judaism a second chance. There is now great energy around the country in serious adult Jewish education programs like the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School and the Wexner Heritage Program. Over the past decade, JCCs have made great strides in creating extensive offerings of adult education courses. Federations and other national “secular” orga-

nizations now dedicate staff and funds to offer Judaic learning to their lay leaders. During the summer, there are now a plethora of retreat centers where Jews can go to engage in week-long Judaic study. Synagogues, in turn, realize that they need to shore up their adult education offerings to “keep up.”

Even in the face of troubling data that point to a serious decline in the number of households and people who identify as Jews in America, there is evidence that among those who do identify, there is a hunger for serious Jewish study. Furthermore, the indication is that it is a phenomenon that spirals upward, meaning that the more the hunger is fed the more people want. In addition, the indication is that the participants in such programs tend to “missionize” to other Jews: “I went to a week of Torah learning at x and had the most amazing experience learning things about Judaism that I was totally unaware of. You need to try it.”

No one has compiled data on the numbers of Jews engaged in this kind of Jewish learning. I think it would prove to be a pleasant surprise to many leaders in the Jewish community. Meanwhile, we need to do more to promote and multiply such opportunities. As adults become more sophisticated and knowledgeable about the rich heritage of Judaism, they will find mediocre childhood Jewish education “unacceptable,” and we will have the seeds of an important transformation.

### Avodah

While *Avodah* is often translated as “prayer” or “service to God,” as in the ancient sacrificial rites of the Temple which this word originally referenced, I prefer to render it as “spiritual grounding.” Any vibrant Judaism must have, at its core, an understanding of the transcendent in life. Some will call it God and will be totally satisfied by that convention of language and belief. But just as our tradition yields a rich and varied understanding of who or what God is, so too does *avodah* point to multiple ways for Jews to get in touch with the spiritual richness of our tradition.

One of the sad realities of our present circumstance is that Jews are, today, exploring spiritual alternatives outside the realm of Judaism in the tens of thousands. Spend time at any of the hundreds of meditation centers, yoga retreats, eastern religious sects, mass therapy phenomena and even

support groups which help people through life crises around drugs, alcohol, eating, etc., and you will find Jews with holes in their souls. When you feed people's souls, their minds, hearts, bodies, wallets and loyalties will not be far behind. The Jewish community has not, as of yet, become a major beneficiary of this phenomenon because it has not done enough to meet the need.

There is no question that the American synagogues' failure over the past fifty years to develop a rich language and program around God and spirituality is one of the contributing factors of Jews being society's most avid consumers in the spiritual marketplace of America. In order to reverse this trend, rabbis and cantors must begin to re-evaluate the program of the American synagogue. Each of the denominations is locked into a prison of its own "*matbeah shel tefillah*," its own custom of how the worship service is structured and delivered. With few and notable exceptions, synagogues are empty of regular worshipers. Synagogues, instead, are filled with Jews and non-Jews who are guests of the morning's celebrants (e.g., bar/bat mitzvah, *aufruf*, baby naming, etc.). Even those who are regulars at Shabbat worship at their chosen synagogue routinely comment, and not so quietly, that the service that they attend is less than spiritually compelling.

I recently led a retreat for synagogue leaders with a series of workshops designed to revitalize the American synagogue. One session was called "Davenning Out of the Box." It was designed in accordance with an approach to prayer that helps people connect in a deep and personal way with traditional liturgy. A week before the retreat I spoke to a Conservative rabbi who was going to lead one of the breakout groups on this topic. He told me that he had just returned from a sabbatical and the greatest insight he gained from his time away was that he hated the worship service in his own congregation. He shared the feeling with his cantor, though in a guarded way—after all, they had shared responsibility for the conduct of worship for some years. To his chagrin, his cantor largely concurred!

In my view, the healthy tension between *keva*, the fixed order of the traditional liturgy, and *kavannah*, the intentionality of the heart that one is supposed to bring to worship, is terribly out of balance. We have services that are 90+ percent *keva* and, at best, 10 percent *kavanah*. I believe that we are only scratching the surface of the potential of worship time to

allow those gathered to have a deep spiritual encounter with the liturgy. This is true in congregations of all denominations. What is required is to take some risks with the liturgy and find ways to allow people to connect their personal spiritual journeys through our liturgy. It requires a willingness to dwell on a given *tefillah* and for the rabbi to give some thought as to ways that the *tefillah* can be experienced and serve as a starting point for going deeper into the experience of prayer for those assembled.

Of course, worship services are not the only setting in which we can provide Jews with spiritual grounding. Synagogues need to do more to experiment with spiritual journey groups, with spiritual direction and spiritual mentoring, with men- and women-specific spiritual support groups, with meditation, yoga and a variety of spiritual disciplines, some of which have roots in the Jewish experience and some of which we might borrow from sister faith traditions and translate into a Jewish key. Jewish clergy are, unfortunately, far too insular, many having little knowledge of the "art" of spirituality, which has become an extremely rich area of experimentation and inquiry, and around which there is voluminous literature and numerous places for one to be trained.

I know that a good many rabbis will be dismissive of these suggestions. They will dismiss it by saying that there are halakhic considerations, that their congregants will not go for it, that there is no time in the service or room on the congregational program calendar. I urge those rabbis to reconsider and be honest with themselves about exploring an area which may feel a bit alien and may engender some personal discomfort on their part. This type of spiritual exploration is happening all around us and the longer it takes the American synagogue to "get with the program," even if only on a limited, trial basis, the more Jews will spend their time and resources pursuing spiritual alternatives outside of the Jewish community.

We are in no less than a race to win over the souls of tens of thousands of Jews. If we continue with business as usual, we will lose some of the most spiritually sensitive souls of our generation. We will certainly become spiritually poorer as a consequence. I say this as a rabbi who had just this sort of discomfort with some of what I now propose. By inviting Jews who I knew to be experimenting with such spiritual disciplines to bring their experiences to my congregation and to share them, both I and the entire community came to be enriched. In addition, we began to attract many

Jewish seekers who never thought they could find a synagogue which would be supportive of such spiritual exploration. I found that significant numbers of Jewish seekers who despaired of ever finding an outlet for their spiritual needs in synagogues were, in fact, hungry to re-connect with the religion of their childhood and use Judaism as the framework for their spiritual search.

### *Gemilut Hasadim*

*Gemilut hasadim* represents the third area of a new Jewish agenda. I define *gemilut hasadim* as acts of social responsibility, sometimes of a personal, one-to-one nature, sometimes having an impact on the larger society. Similar to the arena of Torah, there is tremendous energy and activity in this area and it is a phenomenon to be celebrated and encouraged. The activity in this area can be described in three categories—healing, social justice, and community service.

Attention to the issue of “healing” has been prevalent in Christian religious circles for some time. In recent years, more and more synagogues are beginning to introduce a healing moment during services and, even more significantly, stand-alone healing services at another time during the week. In major cities, organizations have been created dedicated exclusively to issues of healing for Jews. The Jewish Healing Center, based in New York, has emerged as a national network for this phenomenon, and has been both a source of and a catalyst for the development of liturgy and literature on the topic of healing. There is ample evidence that the groups addressing the issue of healing, both physical as well as emotional, have reached thousands of Jews on a level that never would have happened even a decade ago.

On the social justice front, there is also exciting ferment. In cities across the country new groups are springing up, attracting many Jews who are eager to be engaged in issues of poverty, prejudice and equal opportunity. One of the oldest such organizations is the Jewish Council for Urban Affairs in Chicago, founded in 1964. But in recent years they have been joined by groups like Jews for Racial and Economic Justice in New York, Jews United for Justice in Washington DC, the Progressive Jewish Alliance in Los Angeles and Jewish Community Action in Minneapolis. While some

of those involved in the aforementioned organizations are not always plugged into the more traditional communal leadership structure of the federation, the Jewish Community Relations Council in Boston has engineered a mini-revolution in that community with a wide array of initiatives that have become central to the life of that organized Jewish community. One could also point to the phenomenon of the conferences sponsored by *Tikkun* magazine over the past decade, which have attracted an impressive number of Jews, many of them not connected with the mainstream community. The social justice phenomenon has specific appeal to younger Jews, but not exclusively so. And while the policies and politics of these groups sometimes make Jewish communal leadership acutely uncomfortable, it is hard to criticize Jews who are trying to find a way to live out the legacy of the biblical prophets in contemporary society, pleading the case for those among us who are most vulnerable and at-risk.

Perhaps no area of Jewish life has generated as much new energy as that of community service. It is worth reminding ourselves that ethnic groups in America do best when a behavior they want to encourage can be tied to a trend in the larger society. This is certainly the case in the realm of service.

The Clinton Administration engineered the passage of the National and Community Service Act in 1990, which created the Corporation for National Service. The Corporation has helped to raise the profile and funding for many forms of community service in America. Youth Service America, the Points of Light Foundation and America’s Promise are national organizations that are doing much to insure that service becomes a feature of American citizenship. In many cases, American school systems are imposing community service hours as a requirement for high school graduation. Programs like Americorps, Teach for America and Boston’s City-Year (and its counterparts in other cities) provide a framework for young people coming out of college to have some experience giving of themselves to communities that are socio-economically disadvantaged.

It is exciting to see how many opportunities now exist in the Jewish community for meaningful community service. The American Jewish World Service has emerged as a Jewish peace corps, placing Jews of all ages in developing countries for service work. The Jewish Organizing Initiative in Boston, and Avodah, with service houses in New York and Washington,

provide one-year immersion in Judaically contextualized service for recent college graduates. PANIM runs the largest community service program for teens in the country—the Jewish Civic Initiative—with a year-long curriculum and service projects in over twenty cities. The Tzedek Hillel program has campuses all around the country engaging in service work. The National Jewish Coalition for Literacy creates tutoring opportunities in the inner city for Jews in over a dozen communities.

Several communities are beginning to devote resources to the creation of more local service opportunities, as it is being recognized that service attracts many Jews who might not be drawn to more traditional opportunities provided by the Jewish community. The same is true for synagogues which are having great success with Mitzvah Days, which succeed in bringing out large numbers of families for a service experience. JCCs have had similar success with volunteer days on Christmas. Recently, about a dozen Jewish service organizations organized a national umbrella to more effectively raise the profile of service in the Jewish world under the aegis of the Jewish Coalition for Service.

*Torah, Avodah, Gemilut Hasadim:* Just as Theodore Herzl called his book about the Jewish homeland *The Old/New Land* because the modern Jewish homeland was going to be built on the structure of the biblical Jewish homeland, so too this old/new agenda for twenty-first century American Judaism is built on a classic rabbinic understanding of those dimensions of life which are at the core of a vibrant Jewish life. All three of the areas need the attention and energy of young, creative minds and would be greatly enhanced with the largess of forward-thinking Jewish philanthropists.

Most importantly, it needs to be underscored that no renaissance has ever been built on a foundation of doomsaying and hand-wringing. Yes, the Jewish world faces some very large challenges at the dawn of the twenty-first century. We cannot ignore the threats to the safety and survival of Jews the world over and to the state of Israel. But, at the same time, if we want to capture the hearts and minds of a younger generation of American Jews, we need to be able to say what it is that Judaism stands for and not

just what it has to defend itself against. If Jewish leadership begins to identify, applaud and champion the kinds of activities pointed to here, we will find many Jews who will eagerly fill the ranks of our community, eager to be part of a community of purpose and of meaning.

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