Jewish Communal Affairs

The growing tendency of American Jews to focus more of their attention on domestic communal concerns was temporarily sidetracked by the Gulf War of 1991, when Iraqi Scud missiles seemed to threaten the very existence of the Jewish state, and the American need to shore up an Arab anti-Iraq coalition raised the possibility that the United States might push Israel toward territorial compromise. But once that crisis passed, American Jewish concern with its own viability reasserted itself, especially in light of accelerating intermarriage, low rates of affiliation, and internal conflict over values and life-styles.

American Jews and Israel

The Gulf War

As 1991 began, the world waited for news of Iraqi intentions in the Persian Gulf. The Security Council of the UN had given Iraq until January 15 to withdraw its forces from Kuwait, which it had invaded five months earlier, or face armed attack by the United States and its allies.

With President Saddam Hussein of Iraq threatening to attack Israel if the United States used force against his country, Jewish groups rallied behind the administration of President George Bush. The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations announced support for U.S. policy in the Gulf and lauded the administration’s “refusal to accept any linkage of the occupation of Kuwait with the Palestinian issue.” In contrast to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the National Council of the Churches of Christ, both of which questioned the use of force in this case, the Synagogue Council of America justified military action to restore Kuwaiti independence and “effectively deter or end Iraq’s capacity to threaten other nations.” And experts on Jewish law from all branches of Judaism were virtually unanimous that a war against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq was Jewishly permissible, perhaps even mandatory.

The support for military action did not come without serious soul-searching.
“You have people who were dovish on Vietnam and passionate about peace, but
Israel’s survival played a very powerful role in the decision,” said Albert Vorspan,
vice-president of the ordinarily dovish Union of American Hebrew Congregations,
the congregational body of the Reform movement, one of the first organizations to
issue a statement in 1990 in favor of military action. Vorspan and others argued that
it was simplistic to assume that opposition to the Vietnam war necessitated opposi-
tion to a war in the Gulf, that the two situations were hardly comparable. Elements
of the Israeli Peace Now movement in the United States also acknowledged a need
to defeat Iraq.

Other groups on the Jewish “left”—the New Jewish Agenda and the Shalom
Center—disagreed, however, and strongly opposed military action. In a statement
that ran in a number of national and Jewish newspapers across the country in
January, the Shalom Center asserted, “It is most likely that invasion or bombing
of Iraq by U.S. forces would be likely to undermine our goals, not advance them,”
and called for economic sanctions and embargoes instead. Tikkun editor Michael
Lerner at first appeared to support the use of force—“if and only if the U.S. had
first tried to do everything in its power to dismantle Iraq’s offensive military capacity
through other means”—but quickly decided that Bush had failed to explore all
available means and therefore the war was not justified (January/February 1991).

Jewish members of Congress were divided. On January 12, when both Houses
voted to authorize President Bush to use force against Iraq, most Democratic
legislators voted—together with their party allies—in favor of continued use of
economic sanctions rather than war. Notable exceptions were Sen. Joseph Lieber-
man of Connecticut, the only Jewish Democrat in the Senate to back the administra-
tion, and Rep. Stephen Solarz of New York, a sponsor of the House resolution
authorizing force.

With war imminent, the Conference of Presidents set up a “crisis response cen-
ter”—a toll-free hotline to apprise local Jewish federations about the latest news of
the Gulf crisis—and the Council of Jewish Federations made its satellite network
available for communication between Israel and American Jewish leaders. Con-
cerned that pro-Iraqi terrorists might attack American Jewish institutions, Jewish
leaders in many communities met with local police officials to discuss security
precautions. When the U.S. bombardment of Iraq began on the night of January 16,
Shoshana Cardin, chairwoman of the Conference of Presidents, announced that
American Jewry backed the president’s policy and “is grateful that Israel is not
involved in this.” The next night, when Iraqi missiles landed in Israel, the Confer-
ence of Presidents called it “an act of war” and saluted Israelis’ courage “in con-
fronting the great challenges they face.” The Synagogue Council of America issued
a statement urging Jewish congregations to conduct special services to pray for the
safety of American soldiers. (The council deliberately left out any mention of Israel
so as not to appear to link the crisis in the Gulf with the Jewish state.) The United
Jewish Appeal (UJA) and State of Israel Bonds launched emergency campaigns to
solicit funds for Israel that would, within two weeks, raise $90 million for UJA and
$100 million for Bonds. And on Sunday, January 20, Jewish communities all over the country held prowar and pro-Israel rallies.

To the great disappointment of Israelis, many American Jews who found themselves in Israel before the war made sure to leave before the January 15 deadline. However, some American Jewish leaders began to come to Israel while the war was still on, as a sign of solidarity. Among the first was a three-person delegation from the American Jewish Committee that arrived on January 22 and, an hour after landing, was ushered into a sealed room when the air-raid sirens sounded. A week later, the Conference of Presidents sent a 51-person delegation. Chairwoman Cardin explained: “It is important for us to see this. . . . It is difficult for Americans to understand what this means just by looking at it on television.” She pledged to “tell Israel’s story in depth” and to “remind American political leaders of the role of Israel as an ally” upon her return.

THE PEACE PROCESS

On January 31, Cardin and other American Jewish leaders met with the president and then with State Department officials to explore whether the administration had any plans to impose a settlement of the Arab-Israel conflict as part of a resolution of the Gulf War. They came out of the meetings assured that there was no linkage between the two issues.

In February, American Jewry reacted angrily when President Bush harshly criticized Ambassador Zalman Shoval of Israel for publicly complaining that a promised $400-million loan guarantee for Israel was being delayed. The delay, it appeared, was due to American suspicions that the loans might fund Israeli settlement of new immigrants in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Eager to smooth over this hitch in U.S.-Israeli relations, the plenum of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC), meeting in Miami, passed, by a very close vote, a resolution urging the Israeli government not to direct immigrants to these territories. After receiving Israeli assurances that the loan money would indeed not be spent on the territories, the administration approved the guarantees a few days later.

In March, with the Gulf War over and Kuwait liberated, there was rising apprehension among American Jews about the administration’s intentions regarding Israel. Addressing Congress on national television on March 6, President Bush called for an end to the Arab-Israeli dispute on the basis of “land for peace.” Fearing pressure on Israel, both the Conference of Presidents and NJCRAC issued statements that praised the president’s commitment to peace while also putting the onus on the Arab world for the current state of affairs. The approach of these umbrella organizations was challenged by a delegation of dovish American Jews sponsored by Project Nishma—including Theodore Mann, a former chairman of the Conference of Presidents, Hyman Bookbinder, the former Washington representative of the American Jewish Committee, and three former NJCRAC chairmen—that issued a statement in Jerusalem backing the American administration and accusing
the Israeli government of not being serious about peace. Mann claimed that “our views truly represent the majority views of American Jews.”

An extensive survey of American Jewish public opinion, conducted during the summer and released in October, showed that the Conference of Presidents was probably closer than Project Nishma to the views of most American Jews. After the Gulf War, prepared by Prof. Steven M. Cohen for the American Jewish Committee, indicated how Iraqi aggression against Israel had moved American Jewish attitudes to the right. Whereas a similar 1989 poll had shown just 25 percent of Jews favoring the expansion of Israeli settlements in the territories, the figure rose to 30 percent in 1991. While 23 percent had said that American Jews should not publicly criticize Israeli policies in 1989, 30 percent felt that way two years later. And the percentage of American Jews who felt that the PLO was determined to destroy Israel rose in those years from 62 percent to 83 percent.

Another indicator that the Gulf War and prospects of a new peace process had strengthened American Jewish solidarity and ties with Israel was the decision by the American Jewish Committee in March to join the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish American Organizations. For 23 years the AJCommittee had sought to assert a position of independence through maintaining only observer status at the conference. Sholom Comay, the committee’s president, explained that, while this independence would continue: “We feel that we are at a historic point in approaching some of the most vexing concerns of our generation, and we are at a time when the unity of the American Jewish community must be maximized—not only because of the Middle East but also because of the challenges world Jewry faces in other areas.”

On May 22, after an unsuccessful trip to the Middle East to get the peace process started, Secretary of State James Baker asserted publicly that no obstacle to peace was greater than Israeli settlement activity. The Conference of Presidents responded swiftly, saying it was “shocked and dismayed” at Baker’s singling out Israeli actions for condemnation.

LOAN GUARANTEES

It was in this atmosphere that American Jewry geared up for a massive campaign to convince the president and Congress to approve a request for an additional $10 billion in loan guarantees that Israel was to submit in September. Since the loans would be used for the absorption of Soviet immigrants in Israel, and the administration clearly opposed settlement in the disputed territories, proponents of the guarantees faced the daunting task, once again, of preventing a linkage between the issue of humanitarian help for immigrants and the political question of the disposition of the territories.

One way to do so was to convince the Israelis to ease up on settlements. Echoing a warning given to his countrymen by Israeli ambassador Zalman Shoval, Abraham Foxman, director of the Anti-Defamation League, publicly warned Israel in June
that the establishment of more settlements "is a provocative act" in the eyes of the American administration, and that Israel would have to choose between settlements and loan guarantees. The same message was conveyed to the Israeli government privately by other American Jewish leaders. On August 1, it was with a great deal of relief that American Jewish organizations hailed Israel's acceptance of a U.S. proposal for Middle East peace talks, a concession likely to win points with the White House.

Another American Jewish strategy to secure approval of the loan guarantees was a public education campaign. Over and over, Jewish organizations sent out the word that the guarantees, which would enable Israel to borrow from banks on favorable terms, were not a grant, and would cost the American taxpayer virtually nothing. They also stressed that much of the money to be borrowed would be spent in the United States, helping the American economy, and that Americans, who had done so much to gain the freedom of Jews in the former USSR, now had a moral obligation to help them resettle. Much was made as well of Israeli cooperation with American strategy in the Gulf War: despite Scud attacks on their cities, the Israelis had helped the United States maintain the anti-Iraq coalition intact by not retaliating.

On September 6, despite pleas from both Secretary Baker and President Bush to delay the request, Israel formally submitted its application for the guarantees. That same day, numerous Jewish organizations issued statements calling on Congress for quick approval. On Thursday, September 12, over a thousand people came to Washington to lobby for the loan guarantees. To their dismay, President Bush convened a press conference at which he asserted that precipitous approval might upset the delicate negotiations under way for Middle East peace negotiations, and asked for a 120-day delay to give the peace process a chance to get off the ground. In words that many Jews felt conjured up old anti-Semitic stereotypes of sinister behind-the-scenes Jewish manipulation, he referred to himself as "one lonely little guy" and to the loan-guarantee activists as "some powerful political forces." Pounding on the lectern for emphasis, Bush called on the American people to back him up in opposing immediate approval.

At first, Jewish leaders refused to budge. That same day, Shoshana Cardin reasserted to reporters the humanitarian case for the loan guarantees, pledging that "we will carry forward our effort with our senators and representatives." She also sent a letter to the president voicing concern that his remarks about "powerful political forces" unjustly impugned the right of American citizens to organize in support of policies they believed in. But when it became clear that the congressional forces supporting loan guarantees did not have enough votes to block the inevitable presidential veto, plans to introduce the legislation were postponed to January.

This was a humiliating defeat for Israel's supporters in the United States, and it led to considerable soul-searching by American Jewish leaders. To prevent a repetition of the debacle, on September 20 a number of American Jewish leaders met privately with the Israeli ambassador hoping to convey to the Israeli government
the need to reach an accommodation with Washington on the settlement issue. Meanwhile, failure to obtain the loan guarantees encouraged those elements of the American Jewish community that had long opposed Israeli settlements policy. Project Nishma’s executive board issued a public statement on October 2 urging Israel to institute a temporary freeze on the expansion of settlements in the territories “in the interest of larger national goals: immigration absorption, a stronger economy, and progress toward security and peace.” And the next day, 50 members of Americans for Peace Now came to Washington to urge lawmakers to combine support for loan guarantees—when it came up again in January—with an insistence on an Israeli freeze on settlements.

Alarmed at the volume of anti-Semitic mail he received approving his stand on the loan guarantees, President Bush sought to mend relations with American Jews by inviting Jewish leaders to meet with him on November 12. In a discussion that lasted over an hour, Bush expressed regret for any of his September 12 remarks that might have been construed as attacks on the pro-Israel lobby. Stating his support in principle for humanitarian aid to resettle Soviet Jews in Israel, he nevertheless refused to commit himself on the loan guarantees. “It’s open in January,” he said. “We’ll take it up at that time.”

Although President Bush’s handling of the loan guarantees was disappointing, his success in arranging peace talks between Israel, the Palestinians, and the Arab states—the first session opened in Madrid on October 30—drew praise from Jews. After the first meeting, Shoshana Cardin expressed gratification: “The fact that everyone sat down together in itself was an accomplishment.” The new mood engendered by the peace initiative even enabled two groups of Jewish leaders, one from the American Jewish Congress, the other from the Conference of Presidents, to hold separate meetings, on November 18, with Prince Bandar Ibn Sultan, the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the United States. Cardin commented: “For the first time, the barrier was removed and we engaged in dialogue.”

Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Shamir’s scheduled appearance at the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations on November 21 provided a focus for renewed debate over Israel’s settlements in the territories. Hoping to confront Shamir with evidence that American Jewish leadership disagreed with his policies, on the day before his arrival Project Nishma and the Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies publicized the results of a poll indicating that federation leaders overwhelmingly backed a freeze on settlements and territorial compromise. That same day, Americans for Peace Now released an open letter to Shamir signed by 235 rabbis, asserting that “continued settlement activities are not only detrimental to the peace process, but also to the successful absorption of the new olim in Israel.”

Shoshana Cardin downplayed the representativeness of these views. Citing her travels around the country, Cardin remarked that she rarely heard anyone in the audiences she addressed call for a settlement freeze. And on November 21, when Prime Minister Shamir spoke to the General Assembly and castigated those who urged his country to give back land taken in a defensive war, the volume of applause from federation leaders was impressive.
On December 16, the General Assembly of the United Nations rescinded its 1975 resolution identifying Zionism as a form of racism by a 111-25 vote. American Jewish organizations, which had struggled for years to accomplish this, were overjoyed. For the U.S. government, which had exerted considerable political muscle to secure this result, this was another example of help for Israel that American Jews would have to weigh in the balance when it came time to assess the Bush administration's record on issues of concern to Jews.

Soviet Jewry

The daily lunchtime vigil of Soviet Jewry activists outside the Soviet embassy in Washington that had taken place without fail since 1970 came to an end on January 27, 1991. On that day, Jewish leaders joined with local dignitaries and Soviet officials in a final ceremony marking freedom of emigration for Soviet Jews. While the USSR had not yet enacted legislation codifying the new liberal emigration policy—a condition Jews insisted upon for full waiver of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment provisions barring most-favored-nation trade status—over 180,000 Soviet Jews had emigrated in 1990, more than had left the USSR in the 21 previous years combined.

With many American Jewish communities still seeking to collect pledges made to the 1990 Operation Exodus campaign to resettle Soviet Jews in Israel—which raised $420 million—the UJA's board of trustees decided on March 7 to open a new campaign to raise an additional $450 million. Working in tandem with UJA, the Council of Jewish Federations asked its member federations to guarantee an additional $900 million in loans for resettlement. Despite opposition from some federations that feared the consequences of massive default, the proposal was approved overwhelmingly. Shoshana Cardin explained, "I think that the American Jewish community realized we don't have an option. This is an opportunity, and maybe the only opportunity, to bring klal Yisrael to Israel."

On May 20, the Soviet Parliament passed a liberal emigration law, but the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews (UCSJ) criticized its vagueness and the fact that its provisions would not go into effect until January 1993. While the UCSJ asked President Bush to continue to deny the Soviets most-favored-nation status, the National Conference on Soviet Jewry announced support of a one-year waiver in recognition of the new Soviet liberality, a position that President Bush espoused on June 1.

The attempted coup in the USSR in August aroused great anxiety among American Jews for the fate of Soviet Jewry. The National Conference on Soviet Jewry reacted with a call for the new leadership in the Kremlin to "adhere scrupulously to all of the Soviet Union's international and constitutional obligations, particularly in the area of human rights, and to continue to allow Soviet Jews to emigrate freely." The quick reversal of the coup brought expressions of relief. In December, as the USSR began to dissolve into its component republics, American Jewish organizations began to consider the prospect of dealing with 12 separate countries over the emigration of their Jews rather than one regime in Moscow.
The Pollard Case

Since Jonathan Pollard was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1987 for having passed classified military documents to Israel, his family had sought to reopen the case on the grounds that the severity of the sentence was grossly disproportionate when compared to the shorter jail terms meted out to others convicted of similar crimes. In 1991, the drive to help Pollard received a new lease on life when his lawyer, renowned trial attorney and Harvard professor Alan Dershowitz, announced plans for an appeal. If granted, it would enable Pollard to withdraw his original guilty plea—which had been part of a bargain that Pollard's supporters said had not been kept by federal authorities—and demand a new trial.

In preparation for the appeal, scheduled for September, Pollard's family launched a drive to mobilize Jewish opinion, based on the argument that anti-Semitism, particularly on the part of former secretary of defense Caspar Weinberger, lay behind the harsh sentence. In the wake of the Gulf War, they also sought to mitigate the crime with the claim that some of the information Pollard passed to Israel had enabled the Israelis to minimize loss of life in the Iraqi Scud attacks. In his sister's words, "The information he gave Israel ensured that Israel was prepared."

The first well-known Jewish leader to rally to Pollard's cause was Seymour Reich, the immediate past chairman of the Conference of Presidents, who visited Pollard's prison cell in April and came out pledging to use his influence to help. Then, the American Section of the World Jewish Congress issued a statement asking that Pollard's sentence be commuted to time already served. The Central Conference of American Rabbis was next, declaring that an "injustice" had been done to Pollard. Also backing the pro-Pollard position were the heads of the three major rabbinical seminaries, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, and Agudath Israel of America.

The campaign for Pollard in the Jewish community put considerable pressure on the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, which, three years earlier, had set up an ad hoc committee on the case. Phil Baum of the American Jewish Congress, who chaired the committee, was not impressed. There was no evidence, he said, to support the allegation of anti-Semitism. "We don't intervene just because a defendant is Jewish," Baum explained. "There are many Jewish criminals who claim to be innocent." Not one of the major Jewish organizations expressed an interest in filing a friend-of-the-court brief in Pollard's appeal.

The motion for appeal was filed on September 11, and a decision was expected early in 1992.

Do Jews Need More Chutzpah?

For Pollard's lawyer, Alan Dershowitz, the reluctance of the organized American Jewish community to involve itself in the case was symptomatic of a more general mood of fear, passivity, and lack of self-respect that pervaded the American Jewish establishment. The Pollard case, in fact, occupied close to 30 pages of Dershowitz's
book, *Chutzpah*, which appeared in 1991. Part autobiography and part polemic, *Chutzpah* chronicled the author's boyhood in Brooklyn, his early experiences of anti-Semitism as a student at Yale Law School, applicant for a job at prestigious law firms, and faculty member at Harvard Law School, and his involvement in defense of Jews and Jewish interests in the United States and around the world. All of these experiences had taught him that "despite the unmistakable contributions of Jews to the American success story, we seem willing to accept less than first-class status. We still seem fearful of offending the 'real' Americans—in the face of the reality that we are no longer guests in someone else's America."


While Dershowitz could shrug off such academic insults, the threat of a lawsuit from Henry Siegman, executive director of the American Jewish Congress, was another matter. In *Chutzpah*, Dershowitz claimed that he had gotten Jozef Cardinal Glemp of Poland to agree to issue an apology for anti-Semitic remarks he had made. But then, Dershowitz alleged, after Siegman met with Glemp and refrained from criticizing the remarks, the cardinal backed off. Denying that this had happened, Siegman accused Dershowitz of "an arrogance fueled by personal hubris and self-promotion." The controversy between the two men went on all summer, but mutual threats of lawsuits, either before the civil courts or before a rabbinical tribunal, were never carried out.

In all the hue and cry about Dershowitz's account in *Chutzpah* of his role as public defender of the Jews, little attention was paid to what he wrote about the evolution of his private Jewishness. Having grown up as an observant Jew in an Orthodox Brooklyn neighborhood, Dershowitz gradually discarded Jewish ritual practice as he became more and more of an activist for Jewish causes. And he now wondered wistfully what kind of Jews his children, having grown up with minimal religious training, would become. Many other American Jews were pondering the same question in 1991.

**Demographic Dangers**

A sense of crisis over the potential demographic erosion of American Jewry pervaded communal discussions throughout the year, as the full implications of the

In early June, the CJF officially released the results of the survey in summary form, *Highlights of the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Survey.* Among its more significant findings: the Sunbelt was now home to many more American Jews than was the case 50 years before; there were proportionally far more old people and fewer young people in the Jewish community than in the United States at large; only 14 percent of American Jewish households fit the traditional definition of a Jewish family—mother and father, both Jewish, married for the first time, with children; nearly half of American Jews considered themselves politically liberal and only one-fifth identified as conservative; Jews had an exceptionally low birthrate, although this could rise as more baby-boomers became parents; Jews had a far higher rate of college graduates and members of the professions than non-Jews; and observance of certain Jewish rituals—such as attendance at a Passover seder and lighting Sabbath candles—had increased in families where both parents were Jewish.

A unique feature of the survey was its adoption of a new, broader definition of the Jewish population, one that tracked not only “core” Jews, that is, those born of Jewish parents who currently identified as Jews, plus converts to Judaism, but also people with other kinds of Jewish attachments. It was clear from the data that the core Jewish group—some 5,515,000—was barely reproducing itself, and if not for Jewish immigration into the country, might actually have declined since 1970.

An astounding 625,000 respondents—a total equal to more than one-ninth of the number of core Jews—said they were born Jewish but now considered themselves members of another religion, having either converted to, or assimilated into, another faith. Undoubtedly, many of these were Jews who had married non-Jews. And their children and grandchildren surely made up the bulk of the 700,000 individuals of Jewish descent under age 18 that the survey found were being reared in other religions.

The extent of this Jewish crossover into Christianity and other religions was buttressed by another study released in 1991, commissioned by the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. This survey focused on the demography of American religions. Of those in the sample who said their ethnic background was Jewish, over one-third did not now identify with the Jewish religion, 12 percent identifying with some form of Christianity, and another 22 percent claiming either no religious identity or adherence to a non-Christian faith.

The CJF study also included a category for adult non-Jews living in Jewish households, most of whom would be unconverted non-Jews married to Jews, and possibly their relatives who had moved in. While some eyebrows were raised over the inclusion of data about out-and-out Gentiles in a survey of Jews, the rationale

---

given was that these individuals might be considered Jews for certain purposes, such as voting and support of Jewish-backed causes, and purchasing ethnic products.

AN INTERMARRIAGE CRISIS

The survey highlight that created headlines was the news that over half of young American Jews were marrying non-Jews: the intermarriage rate for Jews who had married since 1985 was 52 percent. (The data in this section are from Highlights, mentioned above.) For all married Jews—including those who married years before, when intermarriage was rare—the percentage of those with partners who were not born Jewish was now almost one-third. Furthermore, very few of these born non-Jews were becoming Jewish: 4 percent of all married Jews had spouses who were originally not Jewish but now considered themselves Jewish, and the figure for those marrying since 1985 was only 5 percent. Roughly 30 percent of these Jews by choice had never been formally converted. What is more, the bulk of American Jewry had apparently made peace with the new reality: asked if they would accept the marriage of their child to a non-Jew, approximately 90 percent of the sample said Yes.

Clearly, the future of American Jewish life depended heavily on whether the children of the growing number of mixed marriages would identify as Jews. Here, the data did not offer much encouragement. Only 28 percent of the children in the mixed-married families surveyed were being raised as Jews, 41 percent were being raised as non-Jews, and the other 31 percent were being brought up with no religion. (In the relatively small number of conversionary families, 99 percent of the children were being raised as Jews.) A clear difference emerged between patterns of religious observance in entirely Jewish households and those with a Gentile spouse: the likelihood of attending a Passover seder, lighting Sabbath and Hanukkah candles, contributing to Jewish charities, and belonging to a synagogue was far less in the mixed-religion families. The summary report concluded that “there will probably be net losses to the core Jewish population in the next generation.”

The bad news—especially the over-50-percent intermarriage rate that some observers saw as a tipping point in the collective psyche of American Jewry—set off a tidal wave of commentary. Since the planners of the CJF survey had decided to devote the bulk of the project’s resources to data gathering and leave analysis for later, the media, scholars, communal leaders, and spokespersons for the various Jewish movements had a veritable field day reporting, criticizing, commenting upon, bemoaning, or agonizing over the data.

For journalists, all this was big news. On June 7, as soon as the survey summary was released, the New York Times ran a long story on it, complete with interviews and graphs depicting the major findings. On July 22, Newsweek published a report on “The Intermarrying Kind: A Gloomy Study Leads Jews to Fear for Their Future.” On August 8, it was the turn of the Wall Street Journal, whose front-page story “Keeping the Faith: Marriage and Family No Longer Are Ties That Bind to Judaism” featured the efforts of a rabbi in Alexandria, Virginia, to deal with the new
demographic trends. Jewish newspapers across the country seized upon the story as well, usually reporting the survey results along with the reactions of local rabbis.

Although the demographers who had designed and conducted the study carefully avoided passing sweeping judgments on the Jewish community and, in their public presentations, always balanced the bad news with whatever good they could glean from the data, most other social scientists came to pessimistic conclusions.

Prof. Samuel Z. Klausner of the University of Pennsylvania entitled an essay on the apostasy data "The Conversion of the Jews" (Jerusalem Letter, August 1, 1991). He suggested that "the soaring rate of intermarriage . . . almost inevitably leads to non-Jewish grandchildren," and that the over one million respondents calling themselves secular Jews were in reality characterized by attitudes and practices little different from those of the majority Christian culture. "Cultural assimilation," he concluded, was leading to "societal conversion" and, over time, there would be "an increasing number of Christians who are two or three generations removed from Jewish forebears."

Daniel Elazar, who divided his time between Israel and the United States as both president of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and professor at Temple University, drew from the CJF survey the conclusion that American Jewry was losing its demographic preeminence on the world Jewish scene (Jerusalem Letter, September 15, 1991). In 1948, he noted, the new State of Israel had only one-tenth the Jewish population of the United States; in 1990, however, "the ratio of U.S. Jews to Israeli Jews is about 3 to 2 and approaching parity." Furthermore, said Elazar, the Jewish communities emerging in Europe and the former USSR were far more likely to line up with Israel than with American Jewry on issues of world Jewish concern. He concluded that American Jews would have to shift their attitudes toward other Jewries from a posture of philanthropy to one of cooperation between equals.

Prof. Sergio DellaPergola of the Hebrew University was prepared with a projection of exactly when there would be more Jews in Israel than outside it. Speaking in Los Angeles in May, the Israeli demographer suggested that, if current American intermarriage and low-birthrate trends continued, and immigration and the Israeli birthrate held steady, Israel would be home to the majority of world Jewry by the year 2020. Even a diminished aliya, he noted, would merely postpone the date till later in the century.

Edward Norden, an American-born Israeli, meditated on the demographic erosion of American Jewry in the pages of Commentary magazine (October 1991):

The Jews in the U.S. today are comparable to a wee cube of sugar or grain of salt floating in a soothing bath of continental dimensions. As the sugar or salt melts, the bathwater is rendered ever so slightly sweeter or zestier. If the water temperature stays pleasantly warm, the little bit of stuff will eventually melt altogether, or be reduced numerically to a religiously committed kernel.

While this scenario gave Norden no comfort—"only the most primitive Zionists," he wrote, "the most unthinking deniers of the Diaspora, ever looked forward to its liquidating itself"—he saw no alternative.
Virtually the only social scientist rejecting the new picture of American Jewry offered by the CJF survey was Prof. Steven M. Cohen of the City University of New York, who severely attacked it on methodological grounds. Presenting his objections in a public forum at Brandeis University in November, Cohen said that his own analysis of the completed CJF questionnaires yielded far different conclusions: the intermarriage rate was around 40 percent, roughly what it had been for the last generation. "American Jewish life may be shallow and superficial," he said, "but it's not getting any worse."

Cohen presented his own alternative picture of American Jewry in *Content and Continuity: Alternative Bases for Commitment*, commissioned by the American Jewish Committee and published in 1991. Rather than project trends for the community as a whole, Cohen delineated three distinct groups: roughly a quarter of American Jews who are "committed both to Jewish continuity and to Jewish content of one sort or another," half the population who feel deeply committed to Jewish continuity but have only a vague sense of what its content should be, and the other quarter whose Jewishness is "peripheral." Cohen suggested that the insistence of the first two groups on remaining "Jewishly connected to other Jews" gave grounds for guarded optimism.

COMMUNAL STRATEGIES

For those American Jews who took the new CJF survey data at face value, the question was what to do about the demographic threat. Already in the *New York Times* story reporting the survey, battle lines were drawn. Asked to comment, sociologist Egon Mayer stressed the futility of trying to stem intermarriage. "Stop the angst," he urged, "and let's devote ourselves to outreach." But Alvin Schiff, executive vice-president of the New York Board of Jewish Education, insisted that the ancient taboo on intermarriage had to be retained: "Throughout history, Jews have never given up the fight. If they had, there would be no Jews left today."

Striving to strike a balance between the two extreme positions, the American Jewish Committee developed a policy statement on intermarriage. Calling the rising rates "a serious risk to the vitality of the Jewish community, Jewish continuity and identity," the document called for greater emphasis on programs that would make it easier for young Jewish men and women to meet each other, carefully targeted outreach efforts to intermarried families with the goal of conversion, and more willingness on the part of the Jewish community to make converts to Judaism feel at home in their new faith.

Of the Jewish religious movements, Reform was overwhelmingly in favor of outreach to the intermarried, a posture it had adopted years before, and one that left it open to the charge that it had virtually abandoned opposition to intermarriage. Indeed, some Reform leaders asserted that high rates of Jewish-Christian marriage presented a potential opportunity for the Jewish community. Dru Greenwood, director of the movement's Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach, said that
bringing such families into the synagogue not only enhanced Jewish numbers but also gave American Judaism "new energy and commitment, profoundly affecting our sense of ourselves as a community of Jews." Across the country, Reform congregations had instituted courses, workshops, discussion groups, and children's programs for mixed-religion families.

What was the aim of such initiatives? Rabbi Alexander Schindler, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), said, "We need to be more assertive in our conversion efforts. Judaism has always been and should continue to be a missionary religion." Yet it was clear that the drop in conversions to Judaism was at least partially due to the Reform acceptance of patrilineal descent as sufficient for Jewish identification without formal conversion. Furthermore, a survey conducted by the Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach showed widespread acceptance of unconverted non-Jews, most of them married to Jews, in Reform Jewish life: 88 percent of temples granted them membership; 62 percent allowed them to vote on synagogue matters; 27 percent did not bar them from holding office; and more than one-fifth called them to the Torah for aliyot. The most surprising statistic was the three-quarters of Reform congregations for whom all such rules were academic, since they did not keep track of the religion of their members.

If Reform Jews sought to cope with the demographic danger through accelerated outreach, much of Orthodox Jewry saw outreach as part of the problem. By blurring the distinction between Jew and non-Jew, editorialized the Jewish Observer (November 1991), such programs encouraged the notion that "we're really not all that different," and gave a green light for others to contemplate intermarriage. Recalling with some nostalgia the era when parents refused to countenance the marriage of a child to a non-Jew and even performed the mourning rituals in anguish over it, the Observer suggested "avoiding the crisis before the fact" by exposing marginal Jews to the experience of traditional Jewish life, "instead of attempting spiritual resuscitation after the fact."

But this was not the only voice coming from the Orthodox camp. In December, the Rabbinical Council of America Roundtable, a group of centrist Orthodox rabbis eager to apply Jewish law to contemporary issues, produced an analysis of whether a Jewish man married to a non-Jew might be counted in a minyan. Based on classic Jewish legal sources, the paper showed that an affirmative argument could be made, and the authors, citing the possibility of "rescuing souls," clearly sympathized with the lenient position. Furthermore, the Roundtable forthrightly criticized "an Orthodox Fortress Philosophy" that writes off the intermarried as "not our problem." While appended to this document was a statement that it did not represent the policy of the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA), Rabbi Marc Angel, RCA president, indicated that it "reveals the deep sense of responsibility" his organization felt for the broad Jewish community.

It was the Conservative movement, with its commitment to Jewish tradition coupled with an openness to innovation, that had the most difficulty facing up to the implications of the CJF data on intermarriage. While Reform congregations had
no qualms about accepting mixed-religion couples, noted Rabbi Gilbert Kollin at the Rabbinical Assembly (RA) national convention in April, the Conservative movement, with its ambivalent stance, “has buried its head in the sand.” But how was Conservative Judaism to maintain opposition to intermarriage while at the same time welcoming these families?

Dr. Steven Bayme, director of Jewish Communal Affairs for the American Jewish Committee, sought to provide an answer in the keynote address he delivered at the RA convention. He challenged the movement to end its vacillation on the subject of the status of mixed-religion families. Urging the Conservative rabbis not to follow the Reform path which, he felt, had destroyed the incentive of the non-Jews to become Jewish, Bayme proposed outreach initiatives geared to encouraging conversion and ensuring that the children are brought up as Jews. This, he said, should be combined with a clear message that intermarriage is destructive of Jewish continuity and insistence on a demarcation between Jews and non-Jews in synagogues and religious schools.

But the Rabbinical Assembly was not ready to deal with the problem. Resolutions proposed by some of the more liberal members, calling on congregations to make mixed-married families “feel welcome in the synagogue” even if there was not an immediate interest in conversion, to accept the children of such families in Conservative schools and youth programs, and to “consider ways” to involve unconverted spouses in life-cycle events in the synagogue were all tabled. The only resolution on intermarriage to pass was one urging the establishment of keruv (outreach) committees on all levels of the movement and training programs for synagogue professionals as well as lay leaders on how to deal with interfaith couples.

Interdenominational tensions over what stance to take toward the intermarried erupted in open conflict in April, when the Covenant Foundation, a Chicago-based fund set up to reward excellence in Jewish education and encourage innovative programming, hired an intermarried Jewish woman as executive director. Expressing the Orthodox consensus, Rabbi Marc Angel of the RCA said: “She’s a bad role model. If the foundation’s purpose is to promote Jewish values, its leader should reflect Jewish values.” Angel felt so strongly about this that he recommended that no one accept grants from the foundation. Leaders of Conservative Judaism backed the Orthodox view. But Reform rabbi Daniel Syme, vice-president of the UAHC, called their reaction “totally ridiculous” and “utter stupidity.” Sociologist Egon Mayer, perhaps the leading proponent of aggressive outreach, commented, “The bigots have come out of the closet,” and charged the traditionalists with hypocrisy, claiming that “there is not a major Jewish organization that doesn’t have among its leadership those who are intermarried or whose children are intermarried.” The problem was resolved when the foundation changed the woman’s title and responsibilities.

The Council of Jewish Federations devoted an entire day of its 1991 General Assembly—November 20—to a discussion of intermarriage. That the federation world, traditionally averse to getting embroiled in debates with potentially divisive
religious overtones, proved willing to focus on the issue was attributed by some
observers not only to the magnitude of the problem but also to the incidence of
intermarriage among the children and grandchildren of the federation leaders them-
selves.
All the speakers at the sessions favored greater involvement by federation-funded
agencies in outreach programs for the intermarried. Setting the tone was Egon
Mayer, who characterized the traditional Jewish rejection of intermarriage as a
reflection of “anger, fear, guilt, and no small measure of ambivalence.” He called
for a massive campaign to “enhance the self-image of Jews” through the media, in
school textbooks, museum exhibits, and theatrical offerings as a way of increasing
the chances that interfaith couples would choose Judaism. David G. Sacks, presi-
dent of the New York UJA-Federation, compared the argument that outreach
encourages more intermarriage to the notion that supplying condoms encourages
promiscuity and made light of the argument that funds directed to programs for the
intermarried would cut into the monies currently allocated for programming for
affiliated Jews. For the first time in its history, the CJF adopted a mission statement
on the subject of Jewish continuity. It voted unanimously to urge federations to
work with local “religious, cultural, social service, and educational” institutions to
“preserve and foster” Jewish values and Jewish identity.

Life-styles and Gender Roles

Demographic statistics were not the only signs of change in the American Jewish
community. “Equally explosive,” commented Daniel Elazar, “were the changes in
the status of women and non-heterosexuals in Jewish life” (Jerusalem Letter, Sep-
As Elazar observed, the community’s treatment of gay Jews had become “a litmus
test for the dominant liberal ideology of American Jewry.” Encouraged by the
recent decisions of the Reform and Reconstructionist movements to ordain homo-
sexual rabbis, gay Jews became increasingly vocal about what they perceived as
discrimination against them by the Jewish community, and articles about them
began to appear with some regularity in Jewish newspapers and periodicals. The first
Jewish Community Dialogue on Gay and Lesbian Issues, held in Washington early
in the year, drew 200 Jews. Discussion groups for Jewish homosexuals, often spon-
sored by gay synagogues (some 30 around the world were affiliated with the World
Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Organizations) became popular. Feeling espe-
cially aggrieved were men and women of a Jewishly traditionalist bent who could
only maintain their Orthodox or Conservative affiliations by disguising their sexual
orientation. And across the denominational spectrum, Jewish gays said that they
were reluctant to open up to their rabbis for fear of rejection.
Further evidence that Jewish homosexuals had entered a new era of assertiveness
was a letter sent in the spring to Jewish publications across the country which began,
“We are lesbian and gay rabbis from across North America. We are Conservative,
Orthodox, Reconstructionist, and Reform. We are proud to be Jewish and proud
to be gay and lesbian.” It was signed by eight rabbis willing to identify themselves, and “21 other gay and lesbian rabbis” who did not want their names used. The letter described the strains involved in functioning as professionals while hiding evidence about their sexual preferences: “What distresses us is the demand that we separate our personal lives from our rabbinic careers. It is time to be accepted for who we really are: committed Jews and rabbis who are also lesbians and gay men.”

Soon after the release of the letter, the New York Jewish Week (April 26–May 2, 1991) ran a long article on gays in the rabbinate, based on interviews with many of those who signed it. The phenomenon of homosexual rabbis, they all agreed, was far more widespread than commonly believed. “Most people think they’ve never met a gay rabbi,” said one, “but they probably have.” Particularly moving were the accounts provided by gay rabbis who were Orthodox, forced to live secretive, double lives in order to maintain their religious credentials in a movement that condemned their sexual behavior.

Indeed, Orthodox antagonism toward any religious legitimization of homosexuality caused a rift in the Jewish community of Washington, D.C. In June, the local Jewish Community Council, an umbrella body for Jewish organizations in the city, approved the membership application of Bet Mishpachah, a gay and lesbian synagogue, despite a request by the Orthodox Rabbinical Council for a delay to consider the matter from the standpoint of Jewish law. When the gay congregation was admitted, several of the Orthodox constituents of the council threatened to walk out. Efforts to arrive at a compromise were still under way as the year ended.

The question of whether homosexuals might marry in a Jewish ceremony was given prominence by a lawsuit against the state of Georgia. In July, a female Emory University law student who had been offered a job in the state attorney general’s office had the offer withdrawn once it became known that she had been married, in a Jewish ceremony, to another woman. As the law student and her ACLU lawyers prepared their case against the Georgia law banning sexual relations between people of the same sex, the attention of many Jews focused on rabbinic attitudes. The rabbi who performed this particular wedding, Sharon Kleinbaum, was a graduate of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and worked for the Reform movement’s Religious Action Center in Washington. This was the first homosexual union she had solemnized, but, she promised, it would not be the last. “The Jewish community condemns gays for promiscuity, not having a stable relationship,” she complained, “yet at the moment they want to religiously sanctify their relationship and create a family, the attorney general punishes them.”

Interviews with Reform rabbis revealed considerable support for Kleinbaum's act. Typical was the reaction of Rabbi Alvin Sugarman of The Temple in Atlanta, who said he had never yet officiated at such a marriage but considered lesbian lovers no different from any other couple. “These are two human beings saying that ‘we care deeply for one another and want in a sacred context to respect that....’” he said. “If they were members of The Temple, I would sit down with them and talk about what it meant to them.”

With the Reform rabbinate largely acquiescent and Orthodoxy firmly opposed,
once again—as in the debate over the role of the intermarried in Jewish life—the Conservative movement found itself in the eye of the storm. On December 11, the Rabbinical Assembly’s Law Committee—the supreme halakhic authority for Conservative Jews—sought to develop its own Jewish approach to homosexuality that would provide guidelines for resolving the questions of ordaining gays and performing same-sex marriages. So sensitive did the committee members deem this discussion that they barred outsiders from the session, and only at the last minute decided to allow students of the Jewish Theological Seminary to attend.

Staking out the traditional position was Rabbi Joel Roth, professor of Talmud at the seminary. His 140-page paper argued that the biblical categorization of homosexuality as “abomination” was “not open to any real doubt,” and he denied that modern science had proven otherwise. Furthermore, whether or not a same-sex relationship was warm and caring was irrelevant from the standpoint of Jewish law. “It must follow,” Roth reasoned, “that the halakhically committed Jewish community cannot... take any act or espouse any action which can reasonably be understood to imply the co-equality, validation or acceptability of a homosexual lifestyle.” No acknowledged gay or lesbian should serve in any official position within the Conservative movement, he stated, and neither gay synagogues nor gay marriages were legitimate. Roth even went so far as to declare that a heterosexual rabbi who condoned homosexuality as Jewishly valid behavior should himself be disqualified from religious leadership.

At the other extreme was the view of Rabbi Bradley Artson, who argued that the biblical abhorrence of homosexuality no longer applied, since it referred only to relations that are “oppressive, coercive or idolatrous.” If gay sexuality is part of “a mutually exclusive, committed, adult relationship,” it was Jewishly equivalent to heterosexuality. Thus Artson supported both the ordination of homosexual rabbis and the performance of Jewish wedding ceremonies for gay couples.

No decision was reached at the meeting, and several committee members expressed the hope that some compromise might be reached before the next session, scheduled for February 1992.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN

“Call it a bloodless revolution,” wrote Orthodox feminist Blu Greenberg in the pages of the Jewish Monthly (February 1991), “call it a reformation, call it a social movement, feminism has profoundly affected the life of every woman, no matter the age or orientation—and the life of every man as well.” Disputing the common notion “that nothing is happening in the Orthodox community,” Greenberg listed women’s prayer groups, institutions where women study Talmud, and increased activity by organizations dedicated to enhancing the status of women under Jewish divorce law. But in 1991, the major issue confronting women in Orthodox Judaism was whether one might serve as president of a synagogue.

At a congregation with no rabbi in West Bloomfield, Michigan—a suburb of
Detroit—a woman who had served as vice-president was nominated for president. Two local Orthodox rabbis were consulted about this step; one said it was absolutely forbidden, the other that there was no law against it. Since the congregation was a branch of the National Council of Young Israel, a large network of Orthodox congregations generally identified with the centrist wing of the movement, the question was referred to national headquarters in New York.

The response, that the woman could not be president, was explicitly limited to the particular case at hand. The rabbis involved in the decision indicated that there was little precedent to follow, since only recently had women expressed interest in such posts. They said that the key issue was what a particular congregation expected of its president. In synagogues where the presidency was a purely administrative responsibility with no religious functions, there would be no objection to the selection of a woman.

For women in the Conservative movement, 1991 saw the final resolution of a divisive battle that had plagued it for three years—acceptance of women as cantors. In May, when the Cantors Assembly inducted its first 14 female members, its executive vice-president said: “We could no longer have a part in the duplicity of recruiting women to study for the cantorate, encouraging them in their studies, providing them with scholarship assistance, helping them with repertoire and advice, and then admit the men and bar the door to the women.” As an indication of its wholehearted welcome, the Cantors Assembly commissioned Conservative cantorial works for soprano and alto voices.

But the movement paid a price for admitting women cantors. Dissidents in the Cantors Assembly, who considered acceptance of women one more piece of evidence of a general Conservative drift away from Jewish tradition, broke away and founded the International Federation of Traditional Cantors. Explained one, “There’s a disenchantment, to put it mildly, within the Conservative movement. . . . They’re getting closer and closer aligned with Reform.” It appeared likely that the new organization would establish ties with the Union for Traditional Judaism, a rabbinic and educational group that split away from the Conservative movement several years before, when the latter began to ordain women rabbis.

Denominational Developments

Although issues of demography, sexual orientation, and feminism drew considerable attention from the Jewish religious movements, other concerns were not ignored. Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform Jews continued to address a number of ideological and theological matters.

ORTHODOXY

Centrist Orthodoxy, still feeling the influence of the more insular Orthodox, underwent two wrenching disputes in 1991. The first involved rabbis who were
members of the Rabbinical Council of America who had also joined the Fellowship of Traditional Orthodox Rabbis (FTOR), a more liberal organization formed in 1987, many of whose members served in congregations where men and women sat together, contrary to Orthodox teachings. On the grounds that such dual membership conferred unwarranted legitimacy on the newer group, the RCA sent letters to eight of its members in May, notifying them that so long as they continued in FTOR, they were no longer RCA “members in good standing.” This action had potentially severe consequences: the men might lose their pulpits, have difficulty finding new ones, and could have trouble getting their divorces and conversions recognized.

The controversial rabbis managed to win reinstatement by threatening a lawsuit and publicly branding the treatment they received as coercive, authoritarian, and a breach of their rabbinic prerogatives. In June, the RCA’s executive committee reinstated these rabbis, and the organization’s president assured them that the concerns that had led them to join FTOR would be addressed by the RCA.

The second conflict that roiled centrist Orthodoxy was a battle over the fate of Yeshiva University’s Bernard Revel Graduate School. In December, the university announced the “restructuring” of the Revel School; instead of offering master’s and doctoral degree programs in Jewish history, philosophy, literature, Bible, Semitics, and Talmud, it would have only a nondegree program in Orthodox Jewish thought. The reason given for the change was financial: the small number of students in the degree programs did not justify the cost of running the school.

Neither consulted nor informed in advance of the decision, faculty and students reacted angrily, pointing out that since Revel was the only graduate division of the university where Jewish texts were studied using modern critical methodology, dismantling the school’s programs would effectively make the institution’s Jewish studies curriculum identical to that of a European-style yeshivah. Furthermore, since Revel programs were open to women, the announced change would end the only opportunity that Orthodox women had to pursue Jewish studies on the graduate level in an Orthodox institution. On December 19, 300 students rallied in front of the office of the university president, carrying a petition with 1,100 names that declared: “An institution that prides itself on Torah U-Maddah (religious studies along with secular knowledge) must have a place for its students to integrate Jewish studies with the best ideas of modern scholarship.” But as the year ended, the Yeshiva administration held firm to its plans.

In the more stringently Orthodox community, the Gulf War provided the backdrop for intensified messianic expectation centered around the Lubavitch Hassidic movement. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the 90-year-old charismatic leader of Lubavitch, having declared the Hebrew year 5751 a “year of great wonders,” made repeated references in his public discourses to the imminent coming of the Messiah and urged his followers to increase their prayers, Torah study, and good deeds to accelerate the process. Lubavitch Hassidim seized upon a 13th-century midrash predicting the Messiah’s arrival at a time of war between “Persia” and
“Arabia” as a reference to the Gulf War and, once the war ended, claimed that Schneerson had correctly predicted it would be over by Purim. In May, Lubavitch leaders ran a full-page ad in Jewish newspapers that began: “We must sincerely realize that the Gulf War and its accompanying miracles mean the imminent arrival of Maschiah,” and in June a full-page ad in the *New York Times* proclaimed: “The Time for Your Redemption has Arrived!” While his lieutenants carefully avoided outright claims that Schneerson was himself the Messiah, they hinted at it by remarking that he was the “likeliest candidate.” The violence that erupted in Crown Heights during the summer, after a car in Schneerson’s entourage accidently struck and killed a black boy, was interpreted as Satan’s last, desperate attempt to derail the messianic process. (See “Intergroup Relations,” elsewhere in this volume.)

**CONSERVATISM**

Buffeted by conflict between traditionalists and liberals over the religious role of women, the place of mixed-married families in Jewish life, and what approach to take toward gay marriages and gay rabbis, the Conservative movement struggled to assert a unified, principled position that would dispel its image as an untidy compromise between Orthodoxy and Reform.

It chose opposition to patrilineal descent as an issue that could clarify its religious identity. Although the Conservative movement had consistently opposed Reform and Reconstructionist recognition of the children of Jewish men and non-Jewish women as Jews with no need to convert, it went further in 1991. The biennial convention of the United Synagogue of America resolved that, since conflicting definitions of Jewishness affected the future of all Jews, Reform and Reconstructionism should reconsider their acceptance of the patrilineal criterion and require conversion for the offspring of non-Jewish mothers. United Synagogue president Alan Tichnor cited the CJF survey of American Jews as proof that mixed-religion families without conversion were unlikely to produce Jewishly identified children. The two liberal movements quickly rebuffed the Conservative suggestion.

Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive vice-president of the United Synagogue, suggested paying less attention to what the other movements were doing and more to what Conservative Jews were not doing. “Many Jews choose the Conservative synagogue with the mistaken belief that there are no standards,” said Epstein. “Well, there are... we are reticent about telling people what to do—about what is expected of them. And we go on calling ourselves Conservative Jews without any commitment to climb the ladder of Jewish living.”

As a step toward clarifying its institutional identity, the United Synagogue of America changed its name to the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. Epstein explained: “We want people to be proud of being Conservative Jews because we believe we are the authentic approach to Judaism, the normative approach.”
RECONSTRUCTIONISM

A number of issues vital to the future direction of the Reconstructionist movement—now in its 36th year as an autonomous branch of American Judaism—were debated in the pages of the Spring 1991 issue of its journal, Reconstructionist.

One controversial item was the legacy of Mordechai Kaplan, the movement’s founder, who had preached a naturalistic, scientific, rationalistic world view. Prof. Emanuel Goldsmith defended Kaplan’s legacy from the growing popularity of mysticism within Reconstructionism. “We seek to purge our religious thoughts and emotions of superstition, literalism, and illusion,” he asserted. “We should not want our movement to grow if that entails growing out of our devotion to the Kaplanian heritage.”

Another subject of debate was the particular attractiveness of Reconstructionism for Jewish radicals and advocates of alternative life-styles. Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg lauded the movement for opposing the class system created by capitalism and espousing the causes of gays and lesbians, Jews-by-choice, “recovering people who have been powerfully influenced by the Twelve-Step culture,” and the ecologically enlightened. But Rabbi Sidney Schwartz warned Reconstructionists not to take “single issues with particular constituencies and make them the most visible agenda of a national religious movement.”

A consensus did emerge on the imperative to enlarge the movement by creating more Reconstructionist congregations across the country. Noting that the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College was ordaining many more rabbis than there were Reconstructionist pulpits to fill, Rabbi Arnold Rachlis warned that “no business can survive, let alone thrive, having created two to three times as much product as its market could bear.” Rabbi David Teutsch agreed: “Outreach represents the next step in fulfilling the mission of our movement as most people understand it, which is to transform the lives of Jews, to transform Jewish life.”

REFORM

For Reform Judaism, confirmed by the new CJF survey of American Jews as the most popular Jewish denomination, the problem was not quantity but quality. As the least ritually demanding expression of Judaism and the one most open to mixed-marrieds and homosexuals, was Reform becoming a minimalist Judaism, a lowest common denominator for marginal Jews?

This question was publicly debated in the pages of Reform Judaism (Spring 1991). Rabbi Alexander Schindler, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), expressed optimism. Calling Reform “a growth industry” in both quantitative and qualitative terms, he predicted that the growth would continue, and that social activism would become integrated into Reform spirituality. “I believe,” he wrote, “that our evolutionary form of Judaism shall surpass a grasping Orthodoxy in its claim to ‘authenticity.’”
Rabbi Mark Winer was less sanguine. The growing proportion of Reform members who were products of mixed marriage, he felt, "could comprise a kind of 'Trojan horse' which dilutes the compelling character of Jewish identity." Winer cited evidence showing that even when a non-Jewish spouse converts to Judaism, the family tends to score low on measures of Jewish communal identification, such as commitment to Israel and social relationships with other Jews. Sheer numbers, concluded Winer, "say nothing about the inner content or spiritual quality of 21st-century North American Judaism."

Whether Reform indeed had any identifiable "inner content" became a practical issue in 1991 when a "humanistic" congregation in Cincinnati, which had excised all mention of God from its liturgy, applied for membership in the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. The matter was referred to the Committee on Responsa of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), a body whose authority was advisory rather than prescriptive. An 11-person majority of the committee reasoned that while "persons of various shadings of belief or unbelief, practice or non-practice, may belong to UAHC congregations as individuals. . . it is different when they come as a congregation whose declared principles are at fundamental variance with the historic God-orientation of Reform Judaism." But three committee dissenters did not believe that denial of God should bar a congregation from UAHC membership.

The controversy set off considerable debate over Reform attitudes about God. One issue of Reform Judaism (Winter 1991), which was largely devoted to the topic, provided a panorama of the different positions within the movement. Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut, chairman of the Committee on Responsa, advised Reform Jews "to fill our common God language with an attitude that begins to shed the assumptions of scientism and the trappings of 'civil religion.'" Rabbi Roland Gittelsohn, in contrast, declared himself a "religious naturalist," certain that God, bound by the laws of nature, "exists within the universe rather than operating it from outside." Rabbi Rebecca Alpert suggested that only a radical recasting of traditional male language about God could make the concept meaningful to feminists like herself.

The fall convention of the UAHC focused on the issue of ideological and religious coherence in the movement. Rabbi Plaut complained that "in the name of openness and tolerance, we are stressing Reform at the expense of Judaism." Agreeing, CCAR president Rabbi Walter Jacob said: "We need a greater sense of discipline and sense of direction. Build-your-own Judaism is absurd." And Rabbi Schindler suggested that the time had come for Reform to convene a synod that would draw up a body of doctrine and ritual—nonbinding, to be sure—that might give the movement some sense that Reform Judaism did have boundaries.

Lawrence Grossman