

## Jewish Communal Affairs

**S**UMMING UP THE LAST thousand years, the *New York Times* magazine devoted its entire October 17 issue to “The Me Millennium.” “We put the self at the center of the universe,” the cover announced. “Now, for better or for worse, we are on our own.” In 1999, Jews, like so many other Americans, faced a new millennium in search of personal meaning in their lives. No one knew where this would lead or whether it would ultimately strengthen or weaken American Jewry. Was the absorption with the self just a fin-de-siècle fad, or did it portend a new kind of American Judaism? In 1999 the search for personal Jewish meaning even overshadowed the security of Israel on the agenda of Jewish concerns.

### *Jewish Identity*

There were Jews who were becoming more Jewish, such as free-agent baseball slugger Shawn Green, who announced that he would only sign to play in a city with a large Jewish community. Raised with minimal exposure to his Jewish heritage, Green said he had been so moved by the cheers of Jewish fans around the league that he wanted to learn more about, and to contribute to, the Jewish people. (He signed with the Los Angeles Dodgers.) Evidence that it was “in” to be Jewish came from non-Jews as well: Pop star Michael Jackson, for example, attended Sabbath services at the Carlebach Synagogue in New York City and said it was one of the most moving experiences of his life. Perhaps it was a sign of the times that 15 of the 100 most influential people of the 20th century, according to *Time* magazine, were Jews, including the single most influential person, Albert Einstein.

But there were many Jews who were not finding personal meaning in Judaism. According to a Gallup Poll released in October, American Jews were only half as likely as other Americans to consider religion “very important in their daily lives.” Every other religious group scored higher than the Jews on this question; the only group with a lower affirmative response was the category with “no religion.” Despite the objection of some social scientists that the findings were misleading because many Jews with little or no religious conviction strongly identified as Jews on a cultural or ethnic basis, the survey was scarcely heartening news for those optimistic about a Jewish renaissance.

### MATTERS OF THE SPIRIT

Many had high hopes that more emphasis on “spirituality” could make Judaism more compelling. This notion was most prevalent on the West Coast. “Who am

I? What am I all about?" declared Rabbi Daniel Gordis, dean of the Ziegler School of the University of Judaism, the Conservative rabbinical seminary in Los Angeles. And he went on, "I don't feel that most people feel that, walking into the typical American synagogue, which is very stodgy, is not particularly experimental." The popular vogue of Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, intensified, and to judge by the media, it seemed to hold a special fascination for Jewish and non-Jewish Hollywood celebrities. Actress Roseanne Barr, a regular at the Kabbalah Learning Center in Los Angeles, explained that "fragmentations and divisions of my mind have come together." Roseanne was only one of many Hollywood personalities to attend a kabbalistic Rosh Hashanah service where the rabbi blew the shofar and "for the next three hours, everyone stood in utter silence in intense spiritual concentration to remove chaos, pain, and suffering from the world." (*Jewish Telegraphic Agency Daily Bulletin*, September 14). The cover of the October issue of *Psychology Today*, devoted to "Spirituality: Why We Need It," featured a picture of Madonna, a non-Jew, who found her "spiritual light" in Kabbalah, which, she told the magazine, "is about wonderment."

By 1999 Jewish spirituality was thriving on the East Coast as well. In April, Congregation Anshe Chesed in New York hosted a three-day "Exploration of Meditation in Jewish Life." There were speakers, workshop sessions, and guided meditations. Many of the 900 participants took and kept a vow of silence over Shabbat. Then in November, it was standing room only at the Park East Synagogue, another New York congregation, for a discussion by Rabbi Shmuel Boteach, the charismatic author of *Kosher Sex*, and Deepak Chopra, the Hindu mystic, about relations between Jewish and other forms of spirituality.

Not everyone was enamoured of the turn to spirituality. For one thing, there was the suspicion that much of the material presented as Jewish spiritual teachings was nothing but pop psychology. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, the Israeli scholar and author of books on Jewish mysticism, complained: "I'm not averse to popularization. I'm averse to prostitution" (*New York Jewish Week*, November 19). Others had fundamental objections to the reinterpretation of Judaism in personalist terms. Bar-Ilan University political scientist Charles Liebman, for one, blamed this focus on the self for declines in Jewish philanthropy, Jewish organizational involvement, Jewish political mobilization, and the sense of Jewish peoplehood. And he warned that many of the newly "spiritual" Jews were all too likely to take their quest for personal meaning outside the bounds of Judaism and end up following other religious traditions. Liebman, in collaboration with his colleague, Bernard Susser, elaborated this thesis in a book, *Choosing Survival: Strategies for a Jewish Future*.

The convention of the (Conservative) Rabbinical Assembly in April hosted a public debate over the spirituality phenomenon in a session that featured two non-rabbis. Elliot Abrams, president of the Ethics and Policy Center, called the new trend "baloney," denied that the term "spirituality" had any concrete meaning, and charged that those promoting it were using a feel-good approach to ratio-

nalize laxity in the fulfillment of Jewish responsibilities. Countering Abrams was Rodger Kamenetz, author of *The Jew in the Lotus*. Kamenetz felt that spirituality was deeply rooted in classical Jewish tradition and wondered whether Abrams would prefer a “feel-bad” Judaism. “God forbid the synagogue becomes hostile to people with spiritual questions,” he said (*New York Jewish Week*, April 30).

A number of Jewish federations, recognizing that their traditional focus on “secular” social-services failed to excite many younger Jews, moved to reconcile the new spiritual strivings with the more mundane needs of their communities. At the annual meeting of New York UJA-Federation, Executive Vice President John Ruskay, noting “the growing hunger of Jews for community and intellectual and spiritual engagement,” declared that it was time for “ongoing structured partnership with our synagogues.” The Jewish Federation of Greater Kansas City went so far as to reinvent itself. After an extensive series of task force meetings encompassing all the synagogues and Jewish social-service agencies, the federation, now calling itself a *kehillah*—the Hebrew term for the premodern local Jewish community—published the task force recommendations as *Covenant for a Sacred Community*.

Across the country federations that for years had stayed out of synagogue matters were now conducting consultations with local synagogues to assess their needs, and then allocating money for their programs. Several federations contributed to local congregations that were part of Synagogue 2000, a joint Reform-Conservative-Reconstructionist initiative, launched with the aid of foundation grants, that worked to revitalize the experience of worship. In November, at the General Assembly of the United Jewish Communities—the new entity that included what had been the Council of Jewish Federations, the United Jewish Appeal, and the United Israel Appeal—“Jewish Renaissance and Renewal” was named one of the organization’s four “pillars,” and a task force was authorized “to provide a bold and vigorous leadership for building a Jewish community permeated by Torah, *chesed* (loving-kindness), and *tsedek* (justice).”

Interest in revamping the American synagogue to address the spiritual needs of a new generation went beyond the federations. In December philanthropists Charles Bronfman, Charles Schusterman, and Michael Steinhardt announced that they were contributing considerable sums toward the formation of Synagogue Transformation and Renewal (STAR), and they hoped to attract other donors as well. The purpose of this project was, in consultation with a wide spectrum of leading rabbis, to develop and disseminate innovative ideas to make the synagogue an exciting and inspiring place.

#### EDUCATION, FORMAL AND INFORMAL

The debate over what priority to give Jewish day schools in the struggle for the Jewish future intensified. At the February plenum of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs—the public-policy umbrella organization that included the major na-

tional organizations and the local Jewish community-relations councils—a resolution urging enhanced federation support for day schools was overwhelmingly defeated. This occurred despite backing for the proposal from the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform organizations, as well as several of the secular national Jewish bodies. The reason stated by opponents of the resolution was reluctance to dictate allocation priorities to the federations.

In June, however, the Jewish Educational Service of North America (JESNA), the educational arm of the federation world, announced that “No Jewish family that desires to send its children to a Jewish day school should be prevented from doing so due to financial reasons.” While calling on federations to increase support for all forms of Jewish education, it singled out day schools for special mention. Leaders of the major federations praised the report and noted that they had already moved substantial new sums of money into local day schools. But the leading national force behind the drive for day-school education, George Hanus, a Chicago businessman and founder of the National Jewish Day School Scholarship Committee, had lost patience with the federations and was targeting his appeal directly to the Jewish grass roots. Hanus traveled across the country urging day schools to set up endowment funds and asking all Jews to leave 5 percent of their estates to these funds. This, he argued, would provide \$11 billion and make day-school education—which he considered the only effective means of inculcating Jewish commitment—affordable for every Jewish child. Though skeptics pointed out that finances were rarely the only reason for the failure to patronize day schools, by year’s end Hanus’s organization was about to open offices in five large cities, and had already contacted every rabbi in the country. The American Jewish Committee, as well, mobilized support. At its December board meeting AJC passed a resolution calling for a Jewish education endowment fund, with priority to go toward the tuition of the children of Jewish communal professionals.

In the spring, results of the New York State Standard Achievement Tests, a new and more demanding set of exams for elementary schools, were brought into the debate over day schools. While the day-school students did better, on average, than their counterparts in public school, there were great variations among the day schools, and in many of them substantial percentages of students did not meet state standards—more than half of the fourth-graders, for example, failed the reading test. Embarrassed day-school educators explained, first of all, that in the absence of appropriate preparation, any new kind of test was likely to yield disappointing results. Also, the day schools pointed out that they were committed to accommodating all Jewish children, including those with learning disabilities and academic deficiencies, and therefore could not compete with the elite private schools when it came to test scores.

But the test results had no effect on the bigger picture: Jewish day schools were multiplying and attracting more students, while supplementary afternoon and Sunday morning programs were in decline. A study released at the end of the year,

sponsored by the Avi Chai Foundation, found that some 185,000 students were enrolled in day schools, an increase of 25,000 since 1990. And now, in addition to the hundreds of Orthodox schools, the 70 Solomon Schechter schools (Conservative), and the 22 Reform-sponsored schools, a growing number of communities were creating nondenominational Jewish day schools. A sign of the day school's popularity was the harsh attack on it that appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, the prestigious magazine of culture and public affairs that had rarely, if ever, addressed Jewish communal concerns before. Writing in the October issue, Peter Beinart worried that the growing popularity of Jewish day schools could threaten the public school system (the proportion of Jewish children in the public schools, he noted, had declined to 65 percent from 90 percent in 1962) because it might lead Jewish organizations to support government vouchers for private education. And he darkly suggested that Jewish unwillingness to make use of the public schools might be taken by Christians as a reluctance to integrate into American society. But Professor Jack Wertheimer, provost of the Jewish Theological Seminary, countered in *Commentary* (December) that "the real danger is of a precisely opposite sort: not that American Jews will stand too much apart but that they will disappear," and to this problem, "dual-curriculum day schools offer a unique solution." Rejecting Beinart's fear of how non-Jews might react, Wertheimer harshly criticized the JCPA's continuing opposition, in the name of the Jewish community, to government vouchers for nonpublic education.

Another widely touted strategy for Jewish continuity was the promotion of trips to Israel for young American Jews. In November 1998 a small group of philanthropists led by Michael Steinhardt and Charles Bronfman had launched Birthright Israel, aimed at ensuring that every Jew between the ages of 15 and 26 would have, as a "birthright" and at no personal expense, a round-trip ticket and ten days in Israel. The philanthropists entered into negotiations with the Israeli government and with American federations to get their cooperation in securing the \$60 million the program would need each year. Critics contended that such a short stay in Israel, with no set program and no preparation or follow-up, would have little effect, and would, indeed, divert money that could be better used by the day schools. But proponents of Birthright Israel argued that the ten-day trip would whet the appetite of marginally affiliated young Jews for longer and more intense Israel experiences. The government of Israel pledged to match the contributions of the American philanthropists, though the federations remained reluctant to commit themselves to a project conceived and planned by others.

By the summer of 1999 Birthright Israel had narrowed its immediate focus to sending some 6,000 college students to Israel during the coming winter break, through existing programs for young people run by Hillel and other organizations. To qualify, students must never have been to Israel on an organized tour before. Despite fears of a lack of interest that stimulated Birthright Israel to launch a \$3-million media campaign in college newspapers, the response was overwhelming, far greater than anticipated, and many had to be turned away. On some campuses

Hillel held lotteries to choose who would go. "American Jewry will not be the same in February after the participants return home," predicted Richard Joel, president and international director of Hillel.

"Informal" Jewish education—Jewish programming of a recreational nature in the U.S.—was also touted as an aid to Jewish identity. Thus the Jewish Community Centers Association of North America issued a press release on July 2 announcing: "JCC Teens Ahead of Peers in Avoiding the Pitfalls of Assimilation." This claim was based on a survey of 940 American Jewish participants in the 1998 JCC Maccabi Games in Israel, which showed that the rates of synagogue membership, youth-group involvement, and Jewish identification were far higher for these young JCC athletes than for Jews the same age who were not JCC members. Jewish summer camps, attended by some 30,000 young Jews each year, were now being helped by the Foundation for Jewish Camping, which distributed its initial \$200,000 in grants in 1999. Part of the money went toward planning new camps near growing Jewish communities, and the rest toward enhancing the offerings of existing camps. The foundation also funded a study of Jewish camping, in conjunction with the Institute for Jewish and Communal Research, that found a strong relationship between camp attendance as a child and subsequent Jewish affiliation and observance as an adult.

Offering an entirely different approach to developing the Jewish consciousness of young people was Makor, which opened in October on New York City's West Side. This project, sponsored by the Partnership for Jewish Life, was funded by an \$11-million gift from philanthropist Michael Steinhardt. Makor sought to attract secular, unaffiliated "Generation Xers" with avant-garde educational, social, recreational, artistic, and musical programs. While some who attended certain Makor activities reported that there was nothing recognizably Jewish about them—and that a good many non-Jews attended the events, unaware that this was a Jewish operation—Makor also housed a kosher cafeteria with Sabbath dinners, and offered lectures and films on Jewish topics. The challenge facing Makor was somehow to get those who came to enjoy a jazz concert to develop a similar enjoyment of things Jewish.

#### INTERMARRIAGE AND THE NUMBERS GAME

Anxieties about intermarriage abounded. Still reeling from the 52-percent rate found in the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey and unsure whether the phenomenon had peaked or accelerated since, American Jewish leaders wondered whether the community was about to experience massive demographic erosion. New evidence that such erosion was likely came in a study, "Children of Intermarriage: How 'Jewish'?" by Professor Bruce Phillips of Hebrew Union College, which appeared in *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*. Phillips found that 34 percent of the children of intermarriage were being raised as Christians and only 18 percent as Jews, while 25 percent were being raised in both faiths. Furthermore, over

two-thirds of the offspring of intermarriage who had married, had non-Jewish spouses. It was, then, hardly a surprise to read on the front page of the *New York Times* (December 7) that greeting-card companies were now producing millions of syncretistic “interfaith” cards for the holiday season that melded Christmas, Hanukkah, and even Kwanzaa symbols. A sample accompanied the article: a picture of a reindeer whose eight-branched antlers contained lit candles.

Many synagogues, especially those affiliated with Reform and Reconstructionism, had for some time been conducting aggressive outreach to intermarried families, hoping that making them feel at home and giving them spiritual sustenance would induce the parents to raise their children in Judaism even in the absence of conversion. In April, Hillel of Greater Philadelphia, with the support of several foundations, hosted 20 college-age children of such families for a conference at Haverford College. At least for these participants, who considered themselves Jewish, the outreach policy was working. But the overall national trend toward loss of Jewish identity in such families indicated that the old methods were inadequate.

The Jewish Outreach Institute, which had long argued for a far more aggressive strategy to win over the intermarried to Judaism, released a study by Israeli demographers Sergio DellaPergola and Uzi Rebhun indicating that low birth rates and assimilation were likely to shrink the size of American Jewry over the next century even if all intermarriage ceased. On the other hand, the community would grow even with a high intermarriage rate, if a large percentage of the intermarried identified Jewishly. According to the institute’s interpretation of the data, lingering communal opposition to intermarriage should be replaced by outreach on a massive scale.

More far-reaching was the thesis of demographer Gary Tobin, whose book, *Opening the Gates: How Proactive Conversion Can Revitalize the Jewish Community*, dismissed the angst over intermarriage as irrelevant and called for a campaign to triple the number of American Jews by converting non-Jews to Judaism. The plan, which Tobin estimated would cost billions of dollars, would also have another benefit, he said. By bringing in many blacks, Hispanics, and Asian Americans, it would make the Jewish community more ethnically diverse and therefore more integrated into American society. (Filmmaker Steven Spielberg, it appeared, was already funding a study of non-white American Jews). In a separate study, Tobin buttressed his argument with the charge that current synagogue outreach efforts had failed. On the basis of in-depth interviews with 30 rabbis, Tobin concluded that rabbis felt overwhelmed by, and unable to cope with, the challenge of intermarriage. Critics, however, faulted Tobin for seeking to expend resources on bringing outsiders into Judaism at a time when so many Jews were at risk to leave. Dr. Steven Bayme of the American Jewish Committee told the *Forward* (May 14): “You won’t be able to make up for current losses by bringing in a new crew.”

Meanwhile, demographers — allocated \$3.5 million by private donors and local

federations—were preparing the questions for the next National Jewish Population Survey, scheduled for the year 2000. A March 5 draft of the proposed questions, leaked to the press, showed the impact of the high intermarriage rate found in 1990. Many of the items probed issues of Jewish identity—for example, whether the respondent read Jewish books, went to Jewish movies, or had been involved in outreach programs—questions clearly geared to gauging whether the Jewish continuity programs launched in the 1990s had had any effect. This emphasis, in turn, meant fewer questions about traditional priorities such as social-service needs and perceptions of anti-Semitism. Trouble surfaced, however, from two sources. The Orthodox, who suspected that they had been undercounted in 1990, insisted that no telephone interviews be conducted for the 2000 study on Sabbaths and Jewish holidays, since Orthodox Jews would not answer the phone on these days. While this would add to both the time and the cost of the survey, top UJC officials acceded to the Orthodox request in October. More ominous was a ten-page letter from five well-known demographers and sociologists to the UJC leadership charging that the proposed survey was a waste of money because it would collect a lot of useless information without providing answers to questions the community needed to know to plan for the future. The letter was sent in August but did not become public till late September. It was not clear what role personal and professional jealousies played in this contretemps. On December 7 the UJC announced that the population survey, scheduled to begin phone interviews in January, would be postponed “in order to ensure full consideration by its recently appointed top leadership.” (See below, pp. 244–45.)

#### HOLOCAUST AS SYMBOL

The memory of the Holocaust, which had become an increasingly central component of American Jewish identity even as the event itself faded into historical memory, took on, in 1999, a political and cultural significance that evoked controversy within the Jewish community and beyond.

By 1999 the international uproar and consequent hardball negotiations over what was owed survivors by numerous European governments, banks, insurance companies, and businesses had resulted in several monetary settlements yielding billions of dollars, with the prospect of more to come. Indeed, a 20-member U.S. presidential commission, chaired by World Jewish Congress president Edgar Bronfman, charged with the task of tracking down the assets of Holocaust victims that had ended up in the possession of American state governments, held its first meeting in March. But the Jewish community itself was roiled by conflicts over how the money should be divided, whether primarily as cash payments to individual survivors and their heirs, or with substantial sums set aside in the form of pooled funds to provide health care for elderly survivors and/or Holocaust educational projects. Most controversial was the question of compensation for the lawyers who had initiated the class-action lawsuits that had ultimately led to the

payments. Many of those involved, most notably the World Jewish Congress, which had led the negotiations with the foreign governments and institutions, felt that the standard practice of lawyers charging a set percentage of the settlement amount was unconscionable in this instance since it would deprive the survivors of needed funds. They suggested instead that the lawyers charge a reasonable hourly rate, and only for the time actually spent on the litigation. But in the settlement of the case of the Swiss banks in December before a U.S. district judge in Brooklyn, the class-action lawyers resisted submitting their time sheets for examination on the grounds that the defendants—the banks—might use the information to challenge the decision.

In a televised address to the nation on March 24, President Clinton explained why the planes of the U.S. and its NATO allies were bombing Serb targets in Kosovo. Forcing a halt to attacks on ethnic Albanians, he said, was an application of the lessons of World War II: “Just imagine if leaders back then had acted wisely and early enough, how many lives could have been saved?” Using the same rationale, Jewish groups enthusiastically endorsed the bombings, their full-page newspaper ads soliciting aid for the refugees evoking memories of the Hitler years. American Jewish World Service announced, “Once again, there’s a reason to remember” (*Forward*, April 16), while the Anti-Defamation League urged: “Respond as you wish the world had responded the last time” (*New York Jewish Week*, April 16). Both appended pictures of Kosovar refugees packed into trains. And a month later (May 13), with Serb forces still not defeated, several prominent Jewish leaders signed on to a *New York Times* ad calling for the use of ground troops and the indictment of the president of Yugoslavia for war crimes. The most distinguished Jewish proponent of NATO action was author Elie Wiesel, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize and identified in the *New York Times* (June 2) as “a Holocaust survivor and moral philosopher.” Delivering a lecture at the White House on April 12, Wiesel backed the policy of the administration, saying, “This time the world was not silent. This time we did respond.” Supporting the air strikes as part of a “moral war” even while acknowledging that Serb policies were not on the scale of Hitler’s, Wiesel went on a highly publicized three-day tour of refugee camps in Macedonia and Albania at the beginning of June, at the president’s request.

Yet there were nagging doubts—outside the Jewish organizational and Holocaust-survivor networks—over the use of Holocaust metaphors to seek to foreclose debate over the administration’s policy in the Balkans. Historian Tony Judt worried, in the *New Republic*, that “The Holocaust is now ubiquitous in American pedagogy and conversation. . . . It is sufficient to name the reference to have made the case.” And Henry Kissinger expressed his distaste for “the appalling, oozing self-righteousness.”

The conflict over what constituted legitimate use of Holocaust imagery, in fact, went beyond the specific case of Kosovo. In recent years the Holocaust had been subjected to analysis from the standpoints of various contemporary social

causes, among them feminism, gay rights, environmentalism, and even scientology. One professor, for example, published an article in 1999 arguing that, had Anne Frank lived, she would have been a lesbian. Gabriel Schoenfeld, a senior editor at *Commentary*, was himself accused of Holocaust denial when he took the lead in publicizing and criticizing such uses of the Holocaust.

Another phenomenon that many found disturbing was the film industry's recent tendency to portray the Holocaust through the lens of comedy. If *the* Holocaust movie of 1998 was the Oscar-winning Italian film "Life is Beautiful," in which a father convinces his son that life in a concentration camp is all a game, its counterpart in 1999 was Columbia Pictures' "Jakob the Liar," starring famed comic actor Robin Williams, in which the residents of a Polish ghetto under Nazi rule have their morale buoyed by the optimistic lies of Jakob, who claims to know about the progress of the war from a nonexistent radio.

How the very consciousness of a "Holocaust" had developed in the U.S. was subjected to searching analysis by historian Peter Novick in *The Holocaust in American Life*, which appeared in 1999. Novick argued that at least since the 1970s Jewish leaders had invoked the memory of the Holocaust as a way of shutting off criticism of Israeli policies and maintaining Jewish identity among the young. That, he noted, was why so many Jews insisted that the Nazi destruction of European Jewry was a unique event and the Jews a distinctively "victimized" people. Critics generally praised the book's painstaking research and accepted its thesis that "Holocaust consciousness" had been socially constructed. But many also pointed out that Novick's own evident distaste for the idea of Jewish distinctiveness and his commitment to a universalistic political agenda gave the book a polemical edge that diminished its value as history.

The institution most clearly and officially associated with America's consciousness of the Holocaust was the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Dogged by controversy in 1998, it continued to encounter problems in 1999. In February, Sara Bloomfield, the acting executive director, was named to the permanent post, which had been vacant for almost a year. A primary reason for the delay in the appointment, and, indeed, a major cause of the museum's difficulties for some time, was the question of whether the Holocaust would be presented primarily as an experience undergone by the Jewish people, or, in keeping with the institution's government sponsorship, its message would be more universalistic, stressing the evil inherent in all bigotry and hate.

August was a bad month for the museum. At a book signing and forum it held for the authors of a new book, *Crimes of War: What the Public Should Know*, some who perused the volume noticed that it accused the State of Israel of serious war crimes including "ethnic cleansing." The museum then disavowed its own press release that had called the book "of landmark importance," and Miles Lerman, chairman of the museum's governing council, said that he had not read the book before the event. But worse was soon to come: A congressionally mandated report prepared by outside management experts severely criticized the museum.

While acknowledging that it had achieved great success in drawing more than 12 million visitors in its six years of existence, the report found “a lack of professionalism” in the governance of the museum, the result of excessive control wielded by a tiny group of lay leaders. “They’re running the place like a Jewish organization,” commented the chairman of the panel issuing the report—himself a former commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service. While the museum’s leadership acknowledged the criticism and said that plans were already in place to rectify the administrative problems, one comment in the report once again raised the Jewish-universalistic tension inherent in a federally sponsored Holocaust museum: There was, according to the investigators, “inadequate representation of non-Jews in general and of African-Americans and Latinos in particular” on the governing council.

In the area of Holocaust education, filmmaker Steven Spielberg announced that his Shoah Visual History Foundation had achieved its goal of recording the personal testimonies of over 50,000 Holocaust survivors. The next step was to index and digitize the multimedia collection so that it could be accessed on line at major Holocaust museums in the U.S. and Israel, and, later on, at universities. A CD-ROM using material from four of the interviews was already a popular teaching tool at many high schools.

## *Denominational Developments*

### REFORM JUDAISM

Reform expanded institutionally in 1999 with the announcement on February 15 that Hebrew Union College’s Los Angeles school would start offering a full rabbinical program, culminating in ordination. Like the similar step taken by the Conservative movement in 1995, the initiation of a full-blown Reform seminary in Los Angeles signaled the emergence of the West Coast as a major center of Jewish life. It was also expected to help alleviate the drastic shortage of rabbis in the Reform movement. Plans for expansion overseas were announced in December, when the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) launched a \$50 million fund-raising drive to strengthen the Reform presence in Israel and the former Soviet Union.

Internally, the Reform movement continued to be buffeted by two forces that often seemed contradictory: the impulse to nonjudgmental openness, on the one hand, and greater interest in tradition and ritual, on the other.

Reform openness was on display at a three-day UAHC symposium in April on “Expanding the Covenant: Fulfilling the Mitzvah of Keruv.” This event celebrated 20 years since Reform launched its programs to reach out to the religiously unaffiliated—essentially, the non-Jewish spouses in intermarriages. In his keynote address, UAHC president Rabbi Eric Yoffie acknowledged that the two

decades of Reform outreach, while a “triumph,” had fallen short of expectations: non-Jewish spouses of Jews were rarely asked to convert; Reform nursery schools provided meager Jewish content; and there was no consensus on the degree to which non-Jewish spouses might participate in synagogue services. He urged the movement to address these shortcomings through reinvigorated outreach. While Yoffie did not want “a lowest-common-denominator/no-one-must-ever-be-hurt Judaism,” he insisted that setting up barriers—as, he charged, the Conservative movement had done in barring intermarried Jews from leadership positions—was counterproductive. And Yoffie firmly restated Reform’s commitment to the controversial patrilineal position, which, contrary to classical Jewish law, held that the child of one Jewish parent, mother or father, might be considered Jewish.

At the same time, ritual practice was on the upswing within Reform, partly due to greater interest in spirituality among younger Reform Jews but also because of the heavy influx into the movement of Jews raised in the traditional branches of Judaism, who felt comfortable with ritual. Not only were such practices as praying in Hebrew with a head covering and prayer shawl, and celebrating Rosh Hashanah for two days, on the rise, but the kosher laws were also being taken more seriously than ever, and not just in private homes. In planning a new Reform summer camp in Ontario, Canada, which would be patronized by many campers from the U.S., the UAHC decided it would serve only kosher food. This was the first time that any Reform camp in North America had ever gone kosher.

But Reform interest in ritual was far from universal. The proposed new platform for Reform Judaism, whose first draft, prepared by Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) president Richard Levy, was circulated in 1998, came under heavy criticism that continued into 1999. Seeking to reorient the movement toward greater Jewish traditionalism, the original version of the platform not only asserted that “the mitzvot (commandments) of the Torah”—not modern values—were at the center of Judaism, but actually spelled out some of those mitzvot as viable options for Reform Jews, including the kosher laws, Sabbath observance, and immersion in the *mikveh* (ritual bath). For those raised in the tradition of Classical Reform, which stressed ethics rather than ritual, it seemed as if their religion was being swept out from under them, replaced by another sort of Judaism that seemed to differ little from Conservatism. For many younger Reform rabbis, however, who tended to be more traditional than their older colleagues and their own congregations, the new manifesto struck a welcome note.

Inevitably, Levy’s draft went through numerous revisions that moderated its radicalism. By May 26, 1999, the sixth version of the text was ready for consideration by the CCAR at its annual convention in Pittsburgh (the same city where, in 1885, that body had officially repudiated Jewish law and ritual). By now, however, the references to mitzvot that had so upset many Reform Jews in the original platform were restricted to Sabbath and the holidays, and even these did not mention any specific practices.

The platform that passed by 324-68 asserted “God, Torah and Israel” as the

central tenets of Judaism, balancing this affirmation with an acknowledgement of “the diversity of Reform Jewish beliefs and practices.” Torah, identified as “the foundation of Jewish life,” called on Jews to study the mitzvot, “the means by which we make our lives holy.” Some of those mitzvot, the platform continued, “demand renewed attention”: the Sabbath brings holiness and rest to the end of the work week, the High Holy Days “call us to account for our deeds,” the festivals give Jews the opportunity “to celebrate with joy” the Jewish “religious journey,” and days of remembrance “remind us of the tragedies and the triumphs” of the Jewish historical experience. The platform went on to address the traditional Reform concern with ethics, social action, and world peace. In the context of “love for the Jewish people,” it endorsed “religious and cultural pluralism” in Jewish communal life, and welcomed converts, the intermarried, and those of any sexual orientation. Endorsing “a vision” of a State of Israel that gave equal rights to all and sought peace with its neighbors, the platform urged American Jews to learn Hebrew and visit Israel, even as Israeli Jews should “learn from the religious life of Diaspora Jewish communities.”

When the overwhelmingly affirmative vote was announced the platform’s proponents cheered and sang, while Rabbi Levy got the last pro and con speakers to stand together at the rostrum in a show of unity. But observers differed over the broader meaning of the vote. The reporters who covered the convention for the *New York Times* (May 27) portrayed the statement of principles as a turning point for encouraging the observance of rituals that Reform’s founders had discarded. Similarly, *Time* magazine (June 7) headlined its story “Back to the Yarmulke,” and a *New York* magazine headline (June 21) cynically quipped that “attendance at Woody Allen films no longer qualifies as religious observance.” But the Jewish media, with far greater accuracy, stressed just how much the platform had had to be watered down to gain passage. In fact the reporter for the *New York Jewish Week* (May 28) judged the situation just the opposite from the *New York Times*, calling the platform “a victory for the classical wing of the movement, which rejected attempts by Reform leaders to inject more tradition and observance into daily practice.” In the same spirit, Rabbi Yoffie, president of the UAHC, the lay arm of the movement, sent letters to Reform lay leaders urging them to ignore the exaggerated media reports about a revolution in their movement and to read the actual text of the new principles instead.

Among the rabbis themselves there turned out to be little enthusiasm for a compromise platform that many called pareve—the Yiddish word for food that is neither milk nor meat. None could say with any degree of assurance what would follow for the movement. Speculation ran the gamut from assertions that the platform would be ignored, to Rabbi Lance Sussman’s suggestion that it might generate a “neoclassical counter-movement” (*Congress Monthly*, July–August), to Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf’s declaration that “the old Reform Judaism is dead: a new post-Reform is struggling to be born” (*Judaism*, Summer).

The biennial convention of the UAHC, held in December, focused on the re-

newal of prayer in the Reform movement. In his Sabbath sermon, Rabbi Yoffie used the word “revolution” to describe what was necessary. Charging that prayer had become little more than a “tedious, predictable and dull” spectator sport in many Reform temples, Yoffie urged the laity to study the meaning and theology of the liturgy, improve Hebrew literacy, and participate in a movement-wide dialogue to make prayer an expression of joy and enthusiasm. In stressing the reinvigoration of worship, Yoffie was tapping into the widespread search for spirituality in his movement. Yoffie’s address was repeatedly interrupted by applause, and his initiative was endorsed by acclamation. In addition, small workshop sessions at the convention on the topic of prayer, as well as the prayer services themselves, drew overflow crowds, in contrast to workshops on public-policy matters, such as social action and Israel. In line with the new thrust of the movement, plans were announced for a revamped Reform prayer book, projected for release in 2005, that would incorporate many of the traditional prayers that Classical Reform had discarded, but would, at the same time, reflect the concerns of contemporary feminism.

#### CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

Conservative Judaism, like Reform, continued to be buffeted by the conflicting forces of tradition and openness. But the Conservative commitment to the discipline of Jewish law—however liberally interpreted—made its struggle to maintain a balance considerably more difficult.

The relatively low levels of religious observance among the Conservative laity—bemoaned for years by movement leaders—came into even sharper relief when contrasted with the steadily rising observance patterns of the younger Conservative rabbis. So religiously estranged had these rabbis become from the movement’s congregations that, in 1999, more than half of the new Conservative rabbinical graduates were not interested in taking pulpits, fearing that the typical Conservative synagogue would not provide them with a congenially observant community. They preferred, instead, to go into teaching or counseling.

In 1998, seeking to raise religious standards, the Committee on Law and Standards of Conservative Judaism had declared that intermarried Jews should not hold professional positions that might make them religious role models, such as Hebrew-school principals and teachers, and youth-group leaders. In 1999 the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the movement’s congregational body, sought to elevate the standards for lay leaders as well. Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive vice president of the United Synagogue, explained: “The synagogue is not simply a Jewish organization. It is not merely a club to which people belong for Jewish identification. The synagogue is mandated to challenge its members toward Jewish growth” (*Forward*, March 12). In September the United Synagogue issued a pamphlet setting forth “eight behavioral expectations” for those wishing to serve on its governing boards. While no specific rituals were re-

quired, the “expectations” included praying, if at all possible, with a minyan, studying Torah at least one hour a week, deciding to be guided by Jewish tradition even in opposition to one’s personal inclination, adding the performance of three new mitzvot each year, helping to repair the world through charitable activity, strengthening ties with Israel, and learning Hebrew.

But the drive for greater traditionalism aroused a storm of protest since the reality in many Conservative synagogues was far removed from the suggested standards, especially outside the New York area. From the perspective of nonobservant and intermarried families belonging to Conservative congregations, “higher standards” could very well send signals of exclusion and rejection.

A nonexclusionary, and therefore uncontroversial, initiative to upgrade the Judaic competence of the Conservative laity was the United Synagogue’s *Perek Yomi* (chapter a day) program, inspired by the success of *Daf Yomi* (page a day) of Talmud study in the Orthodox community. Beginning on the holiday of Simhat Torah in October, participants—either individuals or synagogue groups—studied one chapter of the Bible per day, beginning with the Book of Joshua. The goal was to cover all of the Prophets and the Writings by early 2001. The United Synagogue provided study guides and set up a Web site to facilitate the project.

If greater observance and Jewish knowledge was the battle cry of Conservative traditionalists, whose power base lay in the leadership of the United Synagogue, gay rights was the leading cause of those advocating inclusion. These advocates, ironically, were primarily rabbinical students, who combined high levels of ritual practice with a commitment to the elimination of barriers to gays and lesbians. In January, 25 students at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Conservative rabbinical school in New York, petitioned Chancellor Ismar Schorsch for an end to the policy of not admitting known gays and lesbians to the rabbinical program. This JTS regulation had been instituted to enforce the movement’s 1992 decision against the ordination of homosexual rabbis. At a discussion forum with students on March 23 that the students described as “heated,” Schorsch argued that homosexuality was explicitly prohibited in the Torah, that ordaining gay rabbis would make it harder to gain recognition for the Conservative movement in Israel, and that there was little demand within the Conservative rabbinate for a change in policy. Some rabbis sympathetic to gay rights did seek to raise the matter at the April meeting of the movement’s Rabbinical Assembly, but the meeting adjourned without addressing the issue. In May JTS students—many wearing gay-pride symbols—conducted a lunchtime study session dedicated to a fundamental reconsideration of gay and lesbian rights in Judaism. A few faculty members also participated.

Signs of another potential conflict between traditional and innovative forces developed at the November convention of the United Synagogue where a preliminary draft of a new Conservative Torah commentary—the final version of which would be published in 2001—was unveiled. In contrast to the classic Hertz commentary of the 1930s that it was intended to replace, the new one would in-

corporate the findings of contemporary Bible scholarship even when at odds with the traditional understanding of the text, interpret Scripture from a strongly feminist perspective, and note instances where the Conservative movement had altered biblical law in accordance with modern sensibilities.

#### RECONSTRUCTIONIST JUDAISM

Though still much smaller than the three major Jewish denominations, in 1999 Reconstructionism could boast 98 congregations and some 50,000 adherents in the United States, roughly 2 percent of religiously affiliated American Jews.

In August, in time for Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation released a prayer book for the High Holy Days. This was the sixth and final volume in a new series of Reconstructionist prayer books, called *Kol Haneshama* (Voice of the Soul), that covered the cycle of the Jewish year, replacing earlier versions written a half-century before. Like the others in this series, the volume for the High Holy Days reflected Reconstructionism's interest in pluralism, active participation, experimentation, and contemporary relevance. The English translation was gender-neutral. Three separate versions of the services were presented, one relatively traditional, a second designed to be innovative, and a third heavily oriented to English readings. Those readings included not only translations from the classical Hebrew texts but also selections from modern Jewish and non-Jewish writers. Such inclusiveness did not make for convenience: The book was 1,275 pages long and weighed 2.75 pounds.

#### ORTHODOX JUDAISM

The changeover in the leadership of Agudath Israel that occurred in 1998 marked a significant shift in the evolution of separatist Orthodoxy in the U.S. Rabbi Yaakov Perlow, the new head of the organization, explained his approach at the annual convention of Agudath Israel in November 1999. There would be no surrender on matters of religious principle, such as the insistence that Orthodoxy, as interpreted by sectarian rabbis, was the only valid form of Judaism. Yet, Rabbi Perlow went on, Orthodoxy, "no longer poor and shaky," was now secure enough to relax its fortress mentality and project "love and friendship" toward those outside the group. Thus earlier in the year, when the Reform movement issued its new, more traditional, platform, Rabbi Perlow publicly rejected the impulse to treat the principles with "cynicism." On the contrary, wrote Perlow, the Reform principles should be seen as "a new stirring in the hearts of Jews that deserves our attention and reflection" (*Jewish Observer*, Summer).

Agudath Israel also demonstrated a new willingness to recognize problems within the sectarian community that had previously been ignored or minimized on the assumption that its members were insulated from the temptations of the open society. At an Agudath Israel-sponsored conference in April in New York

City on “The Interface of Ethics and Halakhah in the Business and Professional World,” a number of speakers, including Rabbi Perlow, called on Orthodoxy to face up to—and not rationalize or excuse—incidents of financial dishonesty and outright crime committed by Orthodox Jews. Also, rabbis and educators began to speak openly of teenage yeshivah “dropouts” who, like their counterparts outside Orthodoxy, were falling into delinquency, rejecting religion, and joining the drug culture. As investigative reports about the situation in Baltimore and New York were appearing in the Anglo-Jewish press (*Baltimore Jewish Times*, November 12, *New York Jewish Week*, December 10), Agudath Israel devoted the entire November issue of the *Jewish Observer*, its monthly magazine, to the problem. A number of the articles recommended changes in Orthodox attitudes, such as a greater willingness to consult professional counselors and therapists, allowing more leeway for the individual child’s particular talents and emotional needs, eliminating corporal punishment, and reconsidering the prevalent assumption that a year of study in an Israeli yeshivah would cure behavioral problems.

If sectarian Orthodoxy was starting to see that limiting contact with contemporary culture did not necessarily protect the faithful, modern Orthodox Jews, who were, on principle, committed to combining tradition and modernity, faced a different problem. These Jews—described in a front-page *New York Times* story (September 16) as having their business lunches at “haute cuisine restaurants,” and praying, on the Sabbath, in their Orthodox synagogues while their children played with Pokémon cards in the lobby—lacked clear guidelines as to which elements of American culture were compatible with Orthodoxy and which were not.

Nothing better illustrated the tensions of participating simultaneously in these two worlds than the well-publicized odyssey of 17-year-old Tamir Goodman. A basketball sensation at the tiny Talmudical Academy of Baltimore where he was a high-school junior, Goodman reached a verbal agreement in January with the University of Maryland that upon graduation he would receive an athletic scholarship and join the basketball team, which was ranked fourth in the nation. To accommodate Goodman’s religious needs, the university said it would seek to avoid scheduling games on the Jewish Sabbath. But what seemed at the time to be a modern Orthodox success story proving that you could “have it all,” disintegrated in September. First, Goodman, seeking more serious competition, left the academy and transferred to a Seventh Day Adventist school (where he could keep the Sabbath) for his senior year. Then Maryland backed away from its verbal agreement—according to Goodman’s parents, because of the Sabbath issue. It was now unlikely that the young man would fulfill the modern Orthodox dream of a skullcap-wearing basketball star on a major college team.

For years the growth of sectarian Orthodoxy had put the modernists on the defensive, making many modern Orthodox Jews suspect that their own religious behavior was inconsistent and even inauthentic. The influence of sectarian teachers in the Orthodox day schools on youngsters from modern Orthodox homes re-

inforced the challenge to these families' religious morale. As historian Jack Wertheimer noted: "Modern Orthodox parents have come to expect that their children will reject at least certain aspects of their own outlook on life, and cannot even be certain that they will choose to attend a secular university, or pursue careers requiring advanced study" (*Commentary*, February).

It was to combat this malaise that Edah—an organization founded in 1996 under the slogan, "The courage to be modern and Orthodox"—sponsored a major conference entitled "Orthodoxy Confronts a Changing World," on February 14–15 in New York City. Some 1,500 gathered for the event, twice as many as expected. Especially noteworthy was the presence of over 200 college students, an indication that the sectarian impact on modern Orthodox education had not completely extinguished the modernist impulse.

In his keynote address, Rabbi Saul Berman, director of Edah, argued that Orthodox engagement with the contemporary world benefited both the general society and Orthodoxy. Values inherent in Jewish religious texts, he said, could improve society, and, conversely, the insights of contemporary culture could help Orthodox Jews see their own tradition in a new light—as, for example, in enhancing the role of women. In fact, the place of women in Orthodox life was the single most pervasive topic discussed at the sessions, and in that sense the conference could be seen as a follow-up to the two conferences on Orthodoxy and feminism that took place in 1997 and 1998. But the Edah conference also included sessions devoted to the other issues confronting Orthodox Jews who sought to remain open to outside cultural influences, such as the religious significance of the State of Israel, modern critical study of Scripture, the conflict between personal autonomy and rabbinical authority, relations with non-Orthodox movements, the compatibility of democracy and Orthodoxy, and maintaining the modern Orthodox approach in day-school education.

Although the Edah conference marked the first time in many years that modern Orthodoxy had asserted itself intellectually, the organizations and leaders of modern Orthodoxy—sensitive to the inevitable criticism from sectarians and concerned over institutional prerogatives—reacted with discomfort. Rabbi Berman and a few of the other speakers at the conference taught at Yeshiva University (YU), the flagship modern Orthodox educational institution, but no member of the Yeshiva rabbinical school faculty would have anything to do with the conference. One YU Talmud professor, Rabbi Moses Tendler, declared the participants "outside the pale of Judaism" and said that any rabbi attending was committing a sin. YU president Dr. Norman Lamm, who for years had been the most articulate voice in the modern Orthodox camp, publicly disassociated his institution from Tendler's remark. Yet while he said that he had no "major objection to the substance of the conference," Lamm stayed away because he felt that Edah threatened to splinter the Orthodox community (*New York Jewish Week*, February 12). He arranged, however, for his writings to be distributed at the conference. Dr. Mandell Ganchrow, president of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Con-

gregations of America (Orthodox Union), echoed Lamm in charging Edah with promoting Orthodox fragmentation. And the Rabbinical Council of America, the body representing modern Orthodox rabbis, advised young rabbis asking for guidance not to attend the Edah event.

In the immediate aftermath of the conference sociologist Samuel Heilman, one of the presenters, warned that if it “was only a one-time feel-good gathering it will at best be a small footnote to contemporary Jewish life, the bright blast before the light burns out” (*New York Jewish Week*, February 26). The conference announced the formation of two task forces—one on alleviating the plight of women whose husbands refused to give them Jewish divorces, the other on modern Orthodox education—and there was some talk of convening regional conferences in other parts of the country.

One of Edah’s priorities—promoting a distinctively modern Orthodox system of day-school education—was quickly co-opted by YU. In May, Yeshiva University announced the establishment of an Association for Modern Orthodox Day Schools in North America, and it held its founding conference October 31–November 1. In contrast to Torah Umesorah, the leading existing Orthodox day-school organization, which had become increasingly sectarian, the new group hoped to attract schools espousing a positive approach to secular knowledge, a devotion to religious Zionism, and a commitment to the serious Jewish education of both boys and girls.

In December Rabbi Saul Berman, the Edah director, and Rabbi Avi Weiss announced plans to open a new modern Orthodox rabbinical seminary in September 2000 at a synagogue near Columbia University. This move, a clear challenge to YU’s monopoly on modern Orthodox rabbinical training, was another signal of growing dissatisfaction in modern Orthodox circles with Yeshiva’s perceived abandonment of its old openness to modernity.

#### CHABAD-LUBAVITCH

June 17 marked the fifth anniversary of the death of Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, the leader of the Lubavitch Hassidic sect, who, from his headquarters in Brooklyn, New York, had guided the movement for 44 years and made it a prominent force in Jewish life around the world. Thousands commemorated the day with visits to his grave. The childless rabbi had not named a successor, and there was still no candidate on the horizon. Yet despite predictions by outsiders that the movement would wither without a charismatic leader, Lubavitch outreach efforts continued to grow—roughly 100 new institutions were opened each year—thanks to the efforts of a small central bureaucracy in Brooklyn and some 2,000 dedicated emissaries posted in 107 countries. For them, the religious discourses of their late leader, available in writing and on videotape, were sufficient inspiration. Epitomizing the health of the movement were the opening of a \$2 million center in Washington, D.C., to coordinate Lubavitch’s diplomatic and legislative

operations, and a \$19.5 million Jewish Children's Museum—the first ever in the U.S.—in Brooklyn.

Yet ongoing friction over messianic elements within Lubavitch cast a pall over the movement's future. An unknown number of adherents continued to deny that their leader had actually died, and expected his imminent reappearance as the messiah. Some went so far as to pray to him as God. Mainstream Lubavitch leaders tended to downplay the significance of the messianists and predicted that they would gradually moderate their views. But some scholars outside Lubavitch, citing early Christianity and the 17th-century messianic movement of Sabbetai Zvi as precedents, suggested that, over time, the messianists could very well split off entirely from Judaism.

### DENOMINATIONAL RELATIONS

Only once during 1999 did the heads of rabbinical seminaries of all the movements sign on to a joint statement, and, significantly, it dealt with an external threat to Judaism. In a letter dated November 8, Presidents Norman Lamm of Yeshiva University, Sheldon Zimmerman of Hebrew Union College, and David Teutsch of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, and Chancellor Ismar Schorsch of the Jewish Theological Seminary, denounced the "deceptive tactics" used by the Southern Baptist Convention to seek to make Jews believe that one can be both a Jew and a Christian.

Some steps were taken during the year to improve relations between the Jewish religious movements. The North American Boards of Rabbis (NABOR), which first convened in 1998, held a national meeting in Washington in February. Representing 25 local boards of rabbis around the country, and led by its president, Rabbi Marc Schneier, NABOR was intended to take the place of the Synagogue Council of America, the interdenominational body that, weakened by the reluctance of Orthodox rabbis to participate, had disbanded in 1995 due to lack of funds. Schneier, himself Orthodox, emphasized that "in light of the current state of divisiveness and polarization within the Jewish community, boards of rabbis can play a significant role in finding common ground." Jewish philanthropists had contributed enough money to keep NABOR operating for two more years. The existing rabbinical organizations of the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform movements, however, considered NABOR unnecessary and possibly harmful because it might be viewed, inaccurately, as speaking for all American rabbis. In September, in time for Rosh Hashanah, NABOR issued its second annual report on the state of Jewish interdenominational cooperation in the U.S., detailing instances of joint holiday celebrations and study groups.

A number of Jewish family foundations sponsored an interdenominational retreat, February 7–9, at a retreat center north of New York City, to discuss rabbinic education. Nineteen leading administrators and professors from eight rabbinical schools gathered to address common concerns—how to inculcate religion

in a secular society, how to educate students who enter with varying levels of textual skills, how to deal with issues of spirituality—but there was no Orthodox representation.

In early November, building on a precedent set in 1996 by the Sapirstein-Stone-Weiss Foundation, 11 Jewish philanthropic foundations announced that they “look with disfavor upon institutions, or individuals representing institutions” that engaged in “irresponsible rhetoric” that “negatively impacts the unity of the Jewish people.” Funding request from such sources, they warned, “will be viewed with a predisposition toward a negative response.”

### THE PLURALISM BATTLE

Once again, denominational bickering in the U.S. tended to focus on the struggles in Israel over relations between religion and state. The year began with the Israeli Knesset considering bills sponsored by the Orthodox parties that would effectively circumvent Supreme Court decisions that had weakened the power of the Orthodox religious establishment. Reform and Conservative leaders in the U.S. held a joint news conference in New York on January 5 to announce a public campaign against the legislation. Rabbi Eric Yoffie, UAHC president, speaking for Reform, called the proposed bills an Orthodox attempt to “thumb their noses in the face of our Judaism”; Stephen Wolnek, president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, used the metaphor of “spit[ting] in our eye.” With Israeli elections coming up in May, both movements urged constituents to express their sense of outrage to Israeli officials and members of the Knesset, and to withhold financial support from “any person or organization that cannot state to your satisfaction that they support pluralism.” That same day the Reform movement placed an ad in the *New York Times* charging that “religious fundamentalists” in Israel threatened Jewish unity. Seeking to head off any damage to the campaign, officials of the UJA Federations of America (not yet renamed the UJC), urged Knesset members against taking any steps that might alienate American Jews. This, in turn, evoked criticism from Dr. Mandell Ganchrow, president of the Orthodox Union, who suggested that the federations stick to fund-raising and stay out of Israeli politics.

On January 26 the Knesset passed one of the Orthodox-sponsored bills, requiring all members of local religious councils—bodies that provide religious services such as maintaining synagogues and handling kosher supervision—to pledge to accept the authority of the (Orthodox) Chief Rabbinate of Israel. This was intended to keep Reform and Conservative representatives off the councils, despite a Supreme Court ruling that they be allowed to serve. Orthodox leaders in the U.S. backed the law, with the Orthodox Union’s Ganchrow wondering: “How can the Reform be entitled to decide the religious life of Israel and impose their non-halakhic way?”

Leaders of the non-Orthodox movements expressed disappointment and anger,

and warned of dire consequences for the State of Israel. The law drove another wedge, they claimed, between Israel and the overwhelmingly non-Orthodox American Jewish community. Not only might this translate into a weakening of emotional support and political solidarity, but it could also hurt fund-raising. "We'll never say don't give," said Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, the executive director of ARZA, the Reform Zionist organization. "But we are sounding a warning about our inability to hold the fort." Indeed, even as New York UJA-Federation quickly initiated an ad campaign stressing how much money it had contributed toward religious pluralism in Israel, its executive vice president, Stephen Solender, echoing the nation's chief executive, told the non-Orthodox groups, "we feel your pain." But, Solender went on, "we are not going to become involved in the political process" (*Jerusalem Report*, March 1). Further inflaming the situation, a delegation of 33 Reform rabbis, praying near the Western Wall in Jerusalem on February 1, was jostled and heckled by yeshivah students who objected to men and women praying together. Am Echad (One Nation), the American Orthodox group set up by Agudath Israel to rally support for the Orthodox establishment in Israel, charged that the rabbis had deliberately provoked the confrontation. Meanwhile, the legislation on religious councils as well as the Supreme Court decision that provoked it proved meaningless, at least for the time being, since the Conservative and Reform Jews elected to the councils pledged to accept the Chief Rabbinate's authority, and the Orthodox members proceeded to boycott council meetings if non-Orthodox members were there.

In 1999, for the first time, the annual February leadership mission to Israel of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations put religious pluralism high on its agenda—to the chagrin of Orthodox participants—quizzing leading Israeli politicians about where they stood on the rights of Reform and Conservative Jews. And, while on the mission, representatives of close to 20 American Jewish organizations—those affiliated with the non-Orthodox movements, along with some secular groups—announced the creation of the North American Coalition for the Advancement of Religious Freedom in Israel. Basing itself on the guarantee of religious freedom in the Israeli Declaration of Independence, the new body committed itself to breaking the Orthodox hold on Israeli Judaism.

At the same time that religious pluralism was occupying the attention of the Conference of Presidents mission, it was also bedeviling the plenum of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA), the umbrella organization for local Jewish community-relations councils and the national defense organizations that was meeting Washington. Rabbi Harold Schulweis, the scholar in residence, charged in a February 21 address that the religious and political right wing of the Jewish community was made up of "contemporary cave dwellers" who "find solace and security and the promise of salvation in the insulation of an exclusive enclave." The Orthodox were outraged. David Luchins of the Orthodox Union commented: "In the name of pluralism he preached hatred."

The conflict over the religious situation in Israel continued to simmer in the American Jewish community. In a massive show of solidarity with *haredi* Orthodoxy in Israel, tens of thousands of American Orthodox Jews braved a heavy rain on February 28 to participate in a prayer vigil in Manhattan. This was intended to protest the Israeli Supreme Court's moves to introduce religious pluralism in the Jewish state. In early March, Natan Sharansky, Israel's minister of industry and trade and a hero of the movement to free Soviet Jewry, was subjected to verbal abuse while addressing 250 Reform rabbis in Jerusalem, when he sought to explain why his party had voted with the Orthodox parties in the Knesset against religious pluralism.

The election of Ehud Barak as prime minister on May 17 was greeted with joy in pro-pluralism circles since Barak was on record against "any legislation that divides the Jewish people." And the transfer of two key cabinet portfolios out of Orthodox hands to secular parties—education and the interior—also appeared to signal progress. Yet the inclusion of three Orthodox parties in the new governing coalition, and the clear sense that pluralism was subordinate in Barak's mind to his priority of making peace, prevented any sense of euphoria from developing among Reform and Conservative leaders. Indeed, with Barak's attention apparently taken up by foreign affairs, the government's approach to the American Jewish interest in pluralism seemed to fall into a "bad cop-good cop" pattern. In September Haim Ramon, minister of Jerusalem affairs and a close confidant of Barak, angered those who attended a closed-door meeting in New York sponsored by Americans for Peace Now, when he told them that placating the Orthodox parties was the price required to maintain a coalition that would bring peace. "Don't give me this social justice business," he snapped. "I'm a politician. I know what this is about. This is about power." In contrast, Rabbi Michael Melchior, the Danish-born minister for Diaspora affairs and leader of the moderate Orthodox Meimad faction, was far more conciliatory, seeking dialogue between Israel and the Diaspora and examining a variety of scenarios that, if enacted, might open the way for some recognition of non-Orthodox religious streams in Israel.

### *American Jews and Israeli Politics*

The Israeli election on May 17 drew less interest from American Jews than any election there in years. While some suggested that this was a positive signal of American Jewry's recognition that Israel's security was no longer in danger, others viewed it as a worrisome symptom of the increasing cultural and psychological distance between the American and Israeli Jewish communities.

To be sure, the minority of American Jews who held strong views about Israeli politics considered the election vital. This was especially evident among the American Jewish supporters of Ehud Barak, the Labor candidate running at the head of the One Israel slate, who was seeking to unseat Likud prime minister Benjamin

Netanyahu. The barely concealed desire of the American administration to see the defeat of Netanyahu, who appeared to be dragging his heels in implementing the peace process, energized American Jewish groups opposed to the incumbent. Vice President Al Gore addressed the annual dinner of the dovish Israel Policy Forum (IPF) in January, and both the IPF and the New Israel Fund, which gave money to organizations in Israel promoting civil rights and Jewish-Arab cooperation, reported significant increases in support.

Attitudes in the broader Jewish community, however, were unclear. The American Jewish Committee's annual poll, released just before the election, indicated that 44 percent of American Jews supported Palestinian statehood and 39 percent felt that Israel should accept a unilateral Palestinian declaration of independence. Yet according to that same poll, 66 percent suspected that the Palestinians still intended to destroy Israel, and 91 percent believed that the Palestinian Authority was not doing enough to control terrorism against Israel. Perhaps the most telling statistic was that only 25 percent of American Jews said they felt "very close" to Israel.

Although Israeli law barred direct campaign contributions from non-Israelis, American Jews donated millions of dollars to allegedly nonpartisan Israeli "causes" whose links to political parties were transparent. Even national Jewish organizations that were on record in opposition to such funneling of money into Israeli politics could not prevent visiting candidates from using meetings convened by these groups to establish contacts for fund-raising. In addition, every major political party in Israel employed American political consultants, whose fees were suspected to be coming from Jews outside Israel. And since Israel had no provision for absentee ballots for civilians, two new organizations sprang up overnight, funded by American Jews, offering Israeli citizens in the U.S. cut-rate airline tickets so they could get to Israel to vote. One of them targeted secular Israelis who would presumably vote Labor, while the other appealed to the Orthodox, who were likely to support Likud.

Despite the presence in the race till a few days before the election of centrist candidate Yitzhak Mordechai, who, some thought, would create the need for a runoff by preventing either of the two leading contenders from achieving a majority, Barak won by a landslide. But the strong showing of the smaller parties in the separate Knesset balloting indicated that Barak might find it difficult to control whatever coalition he managed to put together, since it was certain to be ideologically diverse. American Jewish organizations that had opposed Netanyahu's policies were jubilant over Barak's victory, some suggesting that the election results would help renew waning American Jewish enthusiasm for the Jewish state. Likud supporters—especially among the Orthodox, who tended to back the West Bank settlements that were likely to be dismantled in a peace deal—expressed their chagrin. The mainstream Jewish bodies congratulated Barak and cited the election as a shining example of Israeli democracy in action. Yet they felt some anxiety: Barak, till now, had had little contact with American

Jewry, and there was no indication that he considered Israel's relations with American Jews a priority.

Barak's victory created an embarrassing situation for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the preeminent pro-Israel lobbying organization. As opposition leader at the time of the Netanyahu government, Barak had castigated AIPAC for what he considered its hard-line stance on the peace process and its uncritical deference to Netanyahu's policies. AIPAC, for its part, had taken the position that its mandate was to interpret and support the stance of Israel's government, no matter which party was in power. But AIPAC committed a serious faux pas by inviting Netanyahu, and not Barak, to address its 1999 annual policy conference in Washington, scheduled for May. When AIPAC had issued the invitation, long before the election, it had assumed that the April balloting would not produce a winner and, pending an expected June 1 runoff, Netanyahu would still be a functioning prime minister—and AIPAC's consistent policy was to host the prime minister, not the opposition leader. But Barak's April victory meant that Netanyahu was a lame duck in May—in fact he resigned as leader of his party following the vote—and Barak was the overwhelming choice of the Israeli people. AIPAC swiftly reversed gears, uninviting Netanyahu and inviting Barak, who politely turned the invitation down.

#### A NEW ISRAELI GOVERNMENT

The AIPAC policy conference moved to readjust to the new Israeli government. AIPAC dropped its previous opposition to a Palestinian state, declaring that it now would back a negotiated "Palestinian self-government" that did not endanger Israeli security. Also, deferring to Barak, AIPAC sent word to its friends in Congress that it did not want a showdown with President Clinton over his expected use of the "national security" waiver to avoid meeting the May 31 deadline for moving the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. "Mr. Barak," declared AIPAC executive director Howard Kohr, "we look forward to working with you in your most awesome task of all: the pursuit of peace."

AIPAC's about-face did little to silence speculation that the organization was likely to lose influence with Barak in power, and that more dovish American Jewish groups would benefit. (Indeed, *Fortune* magazine, in its November issue ranking lobbying groups, would drop AIPAC from second place to fourth.) Perhaps suggestive of things to come was the May 22 reception in New York for King Abdullah of Jordan, sponsored by the Center for Middle East Peace and Development, a strong backer of the peace process. Though held while the AIPAC conference was going on in Washington, it attracted a large and distinguished audience of politicians and Jewish leaders. In light of the power shift in Israel, Jack Bendheim, president of the Israel Policy Forum, went so far as to suggest a new definition of "pro-Israel." It was now, he wrote, pro-Israel to speak out for the peace process, to provide Palestinians with a demilitarized "national entity,"

to support financial aid for the Palestinian Authority, and to argue for “some sort” of withdrawal from the Golan Heights as part of an Israeli-Syrian settlement (*Forward*, June 18).

But neither Bendheim’s version of pro-Israelism nor AIPAC’s newfound enthusiasm for the Barak approach to peace made any impact on the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) or on Morton Klein, its president, who continued to insist that the Palestinian Authority could not be trusted. The ZOA’s charges put AIPAC in a quandary since, on the one hand, they raised valid questions about the peace process that resonated in the Jewish community, but, on the other, their placement on the public agenda could only complicate the new Israeli government’s peace-process diplomacy. It was largely through Klein’s influence that a bill was proposed in Congress in June that would make aid to the Palestinian Authority dependent on compensation to the families of 13 Americans killed in terror attacks inside Israel, and on the investigation and prosecution of those responsible. (AIPAC said it was “not opposed” to such legislation.) And despite the reluctance of the new Israeli government and of AIPAC to press the issue, Klein mobilized congressional opposition against President Clinton’s failure to move the American embassy to Jerusalem.

On July 14 Barak landed in Washington for a visit to the U.S., his first as prime minister. In contrast to the strained atmosphere of President Clinton’s meetings with Barak’s predecessor, Netanyahu, the new prime minister was treated with great cordiality. There were two formal meetings between the two men, plus an overnight trip to Camp David (Barak was only the third foreign leader to be hosted there since Clinton took office) and the largest formal White House dinner of the Clinton presidency. Barak announced that he hoped to conclude all Middle East peace negotiations within 15 months and Clinton assured him that he would ask Congress to increase military aid for Israel, as well as to pass the aid to the Palestinians and Jordanians that had been promised as part of the Wye River agreement. When appearing in public, Clinton and Barak seemed eager to demonstrate that their views on the Middle East coincided—despite an apparently careless comment by the American president before Barak’s arrival, quickly retracted, that Palestinian refugees had the right to return to their old homes.

Despite the release of an Israel Policy Forum survey indicating that 88 percent of American Jews backed the peace process, Barak had a more difficult time with the American Jewish community than with the administration. Leaders of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations—the umbrella group that traditionally represented the consensus of American Jewry on Israel and the Middle East—were miffed at the news that Barak planned to meet with only some of its constituent organizations. Adding insult to injury, Barak wanted the meeting to be held jointly with the IPF, the pro-peace-process group that was not a member of the Conference of Presidents. Barak, some observers suggested, seemed eager to elevate the significance of the IPF, with which he was ideologically compatible, at the expense of the broader-based Conference of Pres-

idents. In the end, Barak held two separate meetings, one with all the constituents of the conference, the other with the IPF. His message to both audiences of American Jews was to stop the political infighting, accept the results of the Israeli election, and unify behind the peace process. And at a closed-door meeting with AIPAC in Washington, Barak reportedly requested an end to all pressure for the relocation of the American embassy to Jerusalem, since this issue, he felt, unnecessarily complicated the peace talks. As a result, AIPAC reiterated the position that, while it wanted the embassy moved, it would not back any initiative that threatened the peace process. Members of Congress who had hoped to try to force the president's hand on the embassy issue also got the message, and abandoned their plans. Thus in December, the next time the president would exercise the "national security" waiver so as not to move the embassy (he was required to reassess the situation every six months), there was virtually no complaint from Congress or the Jewish community.

No sooner was Barak back in Israel in August than Morton Klein and the ZOA launched a new attack on the conduct of the peace process. Klein convinced 42 members of Congress to sign a letter to President Clinton that argued for holding back aid to Jordan till it arrested and extradited Abu Daoud, who had admitted to planning the 1972 killings of 11 Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics. But Jordan denied that it knew his whereabouts. AIPAC, in its role as defender of the peace process, denounced Klein's initiative as detrimental to the best interests of Israel, and Congress voted the aid for Jordan.

#### UNEXPECTED COMPLICATIONS

In September the organized Jewish community became increasingly concerned about a pattern of economic pressure launched by Arab and Muslim states against Israel's presence in the territories, a campaign that seemed eerily reminiscent of the old Arab boycott of the Jewish state. The companies targeted all succumbed: Burger King withdrew the franchise of the store on the West Bank it had authorized, Ben and Jerry's halted its use of water from the Golan Heights, and Sprint stopped using a picture of the Dome of the Rock in its ads. More ominous, since the initiative came not from overseas but from a coalition of seven American Muslim groups, was a threat to boycott all Walt Disney companies because a planned exhibit about Israel at EPCOT Center in Florida allegedly portrayed Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Disney, which had already made changes in the exhibit to avoid offending Muslims, denied the charge.

The effective mobilization of Arab Americans against Israeli interests, a new phenomenon on the American scene, reflected the group's growing numbers and political sophistication, and presented a serious challenge to American Jewry. And there were other indications, beside the Disney affair, that Arab Americans were emerging as a political force to reckon with. For the first time, they were being

appointed to government positions that had some relationship to Middle East issues, and in 1999 Jews raised their voices to complain about two of them.

In April, the ZOA disclosed that Joseph Zogby, an Arab American serving as special assistant to the U.S. assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, Martin Indyk, had, before being hired, published two letters that compared Israeli behavior toward West Bank Palestinians to South African apartheid, and criticized the U.S. for supporting Israel. This, argued ZOA president Morton Klein, should disqualify Zogby from any role in Middle East policy. Indyk responded by expressing his own disagreement with Zogby's opinions, and offered Zogby a promotion that would remove him from involvement with the Israel-Arab dispute. Zogby instead accepted an offer to work in the Justice Department.

Then in July, House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt felt compelled to withdraw the nomination of Salam Al-Marayati, an Arab American leader from Los Angeles, to a position on the National Commission on Terrorism. Though the reason stated for the withdrawal was the length of time it would take to get the nominee a security clearance, the decision was made soon after Jewish groups pointed to statements Al-Marayati had made that appeared to condone Palestinian terrorism. This time, however, unlike the Zogby case, the Jewish community was split. A number of Jewish leaders in Los Angeles who had worked with Al-Marayati praised him as a moderate and thoughtful man, and denounced the campaign launched against him by national Jewish organizations.

It was clear to everyone, however, that the growing Muslim and Arab American presence in the political system was likely to make such confrontations more frequent. A first step in seeking to contain the problem came on December 6, when 20 Muslim and Jewish leaders in Los Angeles (one of the Muslims was Al-Marayati, and most of the Jews were rabbis) endorsed a pledge to repudiate violence and avoid stereotyping. Most of the mainstream Jewish organizations, however, distanced themselves from the agreement on the grounds that some of the Muslim signers had endorsed violence. The issue of the Muslim role in politics, however, clearly transcended local community relations. On December 21, at the first-ever State Department break-the-Ramadan-fast dinner for American Muslim leaders, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright pledged to recruit American Arabs for positions in the department, and assured her guests that the views of Arab and Muslim Americans on foreign policy would be taken into account.

1999 was also the first time that American Jewish support for Israel became entangled with the political ambitions of the first lady of the United States. Considering a run for the Senate from New York in the year 2000 and recognizing the importance of the Jewish vote there, Hillary Rodham Clinton met at the White House with 25 rabbis in February to clarify her stand on a Palestinian state. Although in 1998 she had publicly favored such a state, Mrs. Clinton now told the rabbis that this was an issue to be decided through negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. The contradiction was somewhat neutralized, however, by the

election victory of Barak, who himself had tacitly accepted the inevitability of such a state.

Mrs. Clinton's position on the status of Jerusalem now took center stage. In response to a June letter from the Orthodox Union asking for a statement of her views, the first lady responded on July 2 that in her personal opinion Jerusalem was "the eternal and indivisible capital of Israel" and the appropriate location for the U.S. embassy. This seemed to place her at odds with her husband the president, even though her statement did condition the timing of the movement of the embassy on the need to "be sensitive to Israel's interest in achieving a secure and lasting peace with its neighbors."

For her work on behalf of women and children, Mrs. Clinton was scheduled to receive the prestigious Henrietta Szold Award on July 26 from Hadassah, the 300,000-member women's Zionist organization. On July 14, 25 people picketed Hadassah headquarters in New York in protest and burned an enlarged replica of a Hadassah membership card. The demonstration was organized by Americans for a Safe Israel, an organization deeply skeptical of the peace process, which took the position that the first lady was no friend of Israel and that honoring her as a potential candidate was tantamount to an endorsement. Hadassah president Marlene Post shrugged off the protest and said that, despite the demonstration, her group had received few complaints from members. In her address to the Hadassah convention, Mrs. Clinton received enthusiastic applause when she reaffirmed her view that Jerusalem should be Israel's capital and expressed strong support for the peace process.

Mrs. Clinton's delicate courting of the New York Jewish vote—presumably buttressed in August by the revelation that her grandmother's second husband had been Jewish ("OY VEY! Hillary's ALMOST Jewish" was the headline in the *New York Post*)—ran into trouble on a November visit to Israel and the Palestinian self-rule areas. She managed to extricate herself from one potential disaster when, at the last minute, she changed her itinerary so as to include the Western Wall, the holiest site of Judaism, which she had originally intended to avoid in deference to Arab sensibilities. But in the West Bank town of Ramallah, on November 11, the first lady sat by silently as Suha Arafat, wife of Palestinian Authority chairman Yasir Arafat, charged that Israel used poison gas against the Palestinians and deliberately contaminated their water. Even worse, since a picture is worth a thousand words, she was photographed kissing Mrs. Arafat after the event. Not till the next day, in Jordan, did Mrs. Clinton declare that "inflammatory rhetoric and baseless accusations" were harmful to the cause of peace. Asked why she had not challenged Mrs. Arafat immediately, Mrs. Clinton said that the English translation she had been given at the time did not sound as extreme as the Arabic had apparently been.

On December 14 Mrs. Clinton met for over an hour with the Orthodox Union at its headquarters. Questioned about her views on issues of Jewish concern, she

reiterated her explanation for not challenging Mrs. Arafat right away, repeated her support for moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem so long as this did not jeopardize chances for peace, and went so far as to suggest conditioning aid for the Palestinian Authority on its cessation of anti-Israel propaganda and action against terrorism—a position that went beyond that of the Israeli government. The Orthodox leaders came away impressed by her knowledge and poise, and gratified, on the whole, by her stand on Jewish issues. Nonetheless, they expressed some uneasiness about whether the first lady was emotionally committed to their priorities.

When Congress began consideration of the administration's foreign-aid package in the fall, the \$1.9 billion for Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority promised a year earlier as part of the Wye package attracted controversy. In addition to opposition from Republicans in Congress who feared that the expenditure might endanger the solvency of the social-security system, Israeli lobbyists in Washington affiliated with the Likud opposition and American Jewish groups distrustful of Wye told congressmen that the Palestinians should not get the \$400 million due them under Wye because they had not complied with their pledge to halt anti-Israel incitement. Wye supporters, however, strongly suspected that the Jewish opposition to aid for the Palestinians was nothing more than a tactic to scuttle the entire peace process, and, in essence, reverse the result of the Israeli election. Prime Minister Barak, in a November 20 address before the Israel Policy Forum in New York, argued that to wait for the Arabs to stop their anti-Israel rhetoric before implementing Wye meant postponing the chance for peace indefinitely. And AIPAC proceeded to use all of its considerable political leverage to win congressional approval for the entire Wye aid package.

The spectacle of different factions of Israelis and American Jews lobbying Congress for and against legislation that Israel's government wanted was nothing new—it had gone on under both Likud and Labor governments. But the wrangle over Wye aid was so divisive that many observers feared it could permanently cripple Israel's standing in Washington and the political clout of American Jewry. In November, addressing the General Assembly of the United Jewish Communities, Ariel Sharon, Netanyahu's successor as Likud leader, called for an end to all lobbying of the U.S. government by the Israeli opposition.

The suggestion received a warm welcome on all sides, at least in theory. But the initiation of Israel-Syria peace talks in Washington in December (after a few fruitless sessions they were postponed till January) meant that Sharon's proposal would soon be put to the test. An agreement entailing Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights in return for an end to the state of war between Israel and Syria would probably require billions of American dollars for implementation, money that Congress would have to appropriate. Were Israeli and American Jewish opponents of a Golan withdrawal likely to refrain from making their feelings known in Washington?

*The Organizational World*

## CONFERENCE OF PRESIDENTS

In early January the nominating committee of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations unanimously nominated Ronald Lauder, president of the Jewish National Fund, to be the next chairman of the conference, the umbrella organization generally recognized as American Jewry's voice on international affairs. Lauder was heir to a cosmetics fortune, an international businessman, a generous philanthropist who supported the revival of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, and a political activist—for the Republican Party in the U.S. and for the Likud in Israel. Even though Lauder told the nominating committee that there was no truth to rumors he had contributed large sums of money to the Netanyahu campaign in 1996, his identification with the policies of the Likud government made the more dovish groups in the 55-member conference wonder whether he would be able to overcome his personal political proclivities and act as a consensus-builder. Another reason for anxiety was the antipathy between Lauder and the Clinton administration.

With the entire conference membership due to vote on the Lauder nomination in a few days, the January 29 issue of the *New York Jewish Week* ran a cover story questioning whether Lauder had been altogether candid when he denied contributing to the Netanyahu campaign. The day before, January 28, when the story broke, some 20 member organizations of the conference met and decided to ask for a postponement of the vote pending an investigation of whether Lauder had indirectly funneled money into Likud coffers. Instead, Lauder met with the nominating committee again on February 2 to respond to the new allegations. His answers were apparently satisfactory, and the next day the full conference elected him chairman with 41 affirmative votes: none voted against him and four organizations abstained. He was slated to take office in June. In his acceptance speech Lauder said: "Unity does not require conformity, but rather a recognition that we are one people bound together by faith, history, and commitment." But even in the wake of the overwhelming vote in Lauder's favor, questions lingered over the selection process: Lauder, it turned out, had, over the years, contributed to some of the organizations that voted in his favor, and also to the Conference of Presidents itself. A few weeks later it was reported that Lauder had negotiated in August 1998 with the government of Yugoslavia to provide long-distance telephone service, possibly violating the U.S. administration's ban on investment in Serbia. But since no deal had been signed and no law broken the story soon disappeared from the headlines.

## UNITING THE JEWISH COMMUNITIES

The long (over five years) and contentious process of bringing together the United Jewish Appeal (UJA), the United Israel Appeal (UIA), and the Council of Jewish Federations (CJF) under one organizational banner to handle fundraising and allocation for North American Jewry and help bring a renaissance of Jewish life, was finally completed in 1999. In February, at the CJF executive committee meeting in Miami, merger documents were drawn up and sent out to the 189 local federations for approval. But the inchoate new entity was still searching for a name and for lay and professional leaders.

The easiest decision, it turned out, was the choice of a chairman of the board—67-year-old Charles R. Bronfman, approved unanimously by a 25-person nominating committee in February. Bronfman was a billionaire philanthropist from Canada, where he cochaired the Seagram Company. The other decisions were still not finalized as federation representatives convened in Washington for the first meeting of the Founders Forum, the name given to the new body's first meeting, in April. Unable to reach consensus on a professional head after a painstaking six-month search, the new entity chose 61-year-old Stephen Solender, the executive vice president of New York UJA-Federation, as part-time interim president for six months, giving the search committee more time to recommend someone for the position. Market research was used to help pick the name of the merged organization. Much to the chagrin of federation activists, proposed names that included the word "federation" did not do well, especially among younger Jews. Nevertheless the Founders Forum might have overruled the market researchers and included the controversial word had it not been for the plea of Charles Bronfman, who pointed out that while "federation" had heroic connotations for members of the older generation, it only conjured up "Star Trek" for their children and grandchildren. The new name, "United Jewish Communities" (UJC), passed by a close 73-59 vote, defeating "United Jewish Federations."

The proposed makeup of the UJC's policymaking bodies aroused controversy in the broader Jewish community. The idea of federation "ownership" of the UJC was put into practice, with a vengeance. There was to be a 580-member delegate assembly of which 550 would be federation representatives, with one delegate each from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), the Jewish Agency, some of the major beneficiary organizations, and the Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist synagogue bodies. A 120-member board of trustees was to have 68 percent of its members selected by federations. Of great significance, federation representatives would hold a comfortable majority on the Overseas Needs Assessment and Distribution Committee (ONAD), which decided how much money would go to the JDC to help overseas Jewish communities and to the Jewish Agency for aid to Israel. The religious bodies complained of what they saw as their token representation in UJC deliberations, and the rabbinical organizations were appalled at apparently having none at all. Zionist

groups were upset that federation leaders, with their domestic priorities, would determine how much money would go to Israel.

More problematic for the fledgling UJC was the rebellion of a major federation, the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Boston. In July the Boston group decided to withhold the money it was to have forwarded to the UJC for distribution to the JDC and the Jewish Agency for overseas relief, and instead give \$1 million directly to the JDC, and other funds to specific, targeted programs in Israel and the former Soviet Union. While some UJC officials called this an abandonment of a federation commitment to maintain the existing level of overseas aid for at least two years, Barry Shrage, president of the Boston body, noted that the level was being maintained but the recipients were being shifted to reflect changing needs. Shrage was particularly harsh on the Jewish Agency, which he considered too inefficient and politicized to serve as an effective conduit for American giving to Israel.

The Boston decision became public in August, just as the UJC was collectively beginning to address the question of overseas funding. The first meeting of the ONAD took place in New York on August 11. A report that emerged suggested dividing overseas needs into two categories, rescue, to which all federations would be obliged to contribute, and less immediate needs, which would be optional. The report raised the possibility that federations might funnel overseas aid through organizations other than the JDC and the Jewish Agency, which was what Boston was already doing without authorization, and also called for saving money by slashing subsidies for federation missions to Israel. At the end of August the UJC endorsed the ONAD report and announced several new moves regarding the four "pillars" of its work. ONAD, dealing with overseas aid, would be based in Jerusalem, and the office dealing with the domestic services and policy pillar would be headquartered in Washington. One-third of the committee in charge of the third pillar, Jewish renaissance and renewal, would come from the synagogue bodies, in this way addressing the complaints of underrepresentation that had been coming from the religious denominations. The fourth pillar would deal with campaign and fund-raising.

On October 5 Charles Bronfman announced that Stephen Solender, the interim president for the last six months, was to be the new UJC president on a permanent basis. Chosen as executive vice president and chief operating officer was Louise Stoll, who had held managerial positions in the Clinton administration and in private industry. David Altschuler, the founding director of New York's Museum of Jewish Heritage-A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, was to head a semiautonomous UJC foundation that would seek to secure funds from large corporations and "mega-donors," many of whom had forsaken the federation system to set up their own family foundations, which, in 1998, had probably disbursed more charity, in the aggregate, than the federations.

The November General Assembly, held this year in Atlanta, was the first conducted under the aegis of the new UJC, instead of the defunct CJF. The 5,000

participants attended sessions organized around the four "pillars." Of the four, Jewish renaissance and renewal drew the largest audiences, by far. (The single major "draw," however, was a speech by Vice President Gore.) As for the process of ratifying the organization of the new entity, things did not go according to plan only with regard to Altschuler; questions from federation leaders about the degree of autonomy his "mega-donor" foundation would enjoy led to a postponement of his appointment. The UJC's top leaders repeatedly reassured the participants that this new enterprise remained open to new suggestions. "Rome was not built in a day," said Charles Bronfman, "but we are going to build Rome."

### CONFLICT OVER JCPA

In the panoply of national Jewish organizations the one most closely associated with the liberal social-action causes of the 1960s was the Jewish Council on Public Affairs (JCPA), formerly known as the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC), an umbrella organization for local Jewish community-relations councils and the major national organizations. On June 30 James Tisch, president of New York UJA-Federation, and Stephen Solender, its executive vice president, sent a letter to the JCPA suggesting that its agenda no longer reflected the concerns of the Jews of New York. Specifically, the letter mentioned the JCPA's support for more government services, affirmative action, and universal health care, and its opposition to tax reductions and school vouchers. "There is a portion of our community," they went on, "who questions if it is even appropriate for an organization to speak on behalf of the Jewish community on some of these issues." The letter urged a clearer focus on issues of direct concern to Jews. On August 6 Steven Nasatir, president of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, sent the JCPA a similar letter. Both letters included reminders that these two federations together footed a large part of the bill (30 percent) for the JCPA's activities. The letters evoked praise from the ranks of Jewish political conservatives, who had long complained that the social-action agenda was an anachronism. Old-line liberals, however, defended the JCPA on the ground that issues of broad concern to the American people were Jewish issues too, not only because Jewish tradition mandated a just society, but also because only such a society could guarantee the security of American Jews.

LAWRENCE GROSSMAN