Jewish Communal Affairs

American Jews and the Middle East

Countdown to War

As the prospect of war in Iraq loomed over the American people at the beginning of the year, most mainstream Jewish organizations avoided committing themselves publicly. "Jewish leaders say," reported Laurie Goodstein in the New York Times (Mar. 15), "that while they are supportive of President Bush because he has been a reliable ally of the Israeli government, they have become increasingly fearful of a backlash if the war goes badly." The sentiments of David A. Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee, were typical. "Issues of war," he said, "are extraordinarily complex, and it's not for us to advise the government on whether war is the best response or not." Within the American rabbinate, only the Orthodox advocated a preemptive war. The most outspoken rabbinic opponent of war, Chancellor Ismar Schorsch of the Jewish Theological Seminary, maintained his opposition to administration policy—even as he voiced support for the American troops—after the bombs started falling, but a few days into the war the seminary issued a press release retracting Schorsch's critique, a step widely attributed to fear of offending potential donors (New York Times, Mar. 28).

There were prominent Jews—such as Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith, and Pentagon advisor Richard Perle—in policy-making positions, and so a war to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime could be seen by unfriendly observers as a stratagem to enhance the security of Israel. During the weeks leading up to the war, the media, both print and electronic, devoted considerable attention to whether there was a "Jewish" angle to the Iraq story. In early March, Rep. James Moran (D., Va.) openly charged American Jews with rushing the nation into war. Secretary of State Colin Powell publicly denied the claim, insisting that American policy was based on "our interest in the region," not "by any small cabal that is buried away somewhere." Moran issued a public apology and was forced to step down from his post as one of 24 regional whips on the House, but Jewish leaders remained fearful that their community might be scapegoated should things go wrong.
Opinion polls showed that American Jewry was less enthusiastic about war than other groups. Of those Jews skeptical about attacking Iraq, there were many actively antiwar Jews, located mainly on the left of the political spectrum. They signed on to numerous public statements against the pending invasion, but found themselves in something of a bind when it came to public demonstrations, since a good number of their putative allies on Iraq were also vocally pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel.

Many antiwar Jews stayed away from a peace rally in Washington on January 18 because it was sponsored by ANSWER (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism), which included strongly anti-Israel elements. There was a larger Jewish representation at a New York rally on February 15, since the sponsor, United for Peace and Justice, was not considered anti-Israel. But organizers of another demonstration held the next day, in San Francisco, went so far as to bar Rabbi Michael Lerner, editor of *Tikkun* magazine and a leading voice on the Jewish left, from speaking at the event because he had publicly criticized one of the participating organizations for its hostility toward the Jewish state. (The Washington and New York rallies took place on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, while the San Francisco rally, originally scheduled for Saturday, was moved to Sunday to avoid conflict with the Chinese New Year.) Exceptional on the Jewish left in their support for war were the coeditors of *Dissent* magazine, Mitchell Cohen and Michael Walzer.

When the administration upgraded the nation's security alert to "Code Orange" (the second highest possible warning) on February 7, the organized Jewish community took special protective measures. While the F.B.I. did not indicate that it had any information that Jews were at any greater risk than anyone else, *Newsweek* magazine claimed otherwise, suggesting that sources had reported to the F.B.I. that "Jewish-owned businesses" could be targeted (the F.B.I. and Jewish leaders denied this). In New York City, home to the largest Jewish population in the country, the Jewish Community Relations Council urged synagogues, Jewish schools, community centers, and hospitals to pay special attention to their ventilation, heating, and air-conditioning systems, for fear of chemical or biological attack. Several high-profile Jewish institutions hired increased security and set up barricades. Later in the year, Jewish organizations, schools, and community centers around the country adopted a joint national system for dealing with security, Secure Community Alert Network (SCAN), believed to be the first such system developed for a specific community in the U.S.
IRAQ AND THE "ROAD MAP"

Aware of possible administration linkage between the coming hostilities in Iraq and broader policy priorities in the Middle East, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC, the organization of Reform synagogues) triggered an internal Jewish debate at the annual plenum of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA) on February 24. The UAHC proposed that the JCPA endorse a two-state solution and an Israeli freeze on "all settlement construction," arguing that such language was in consonance with stated American policy. This marked the first time that the JCPA had an open discussion on these topics. But a number of its constituent groups—the JCPA was made up of the national organizations and the local Jewish community-relations councils—opposed the UAHC resolution, viewing Palestinian statehood and settlements as matters to be negotiated between the parties. In an unprecedented move, the Israeli embassy sent its public affairs officer to address the plenum and urge defeat of the motion. In the end, after the section on settlements was removed by a vote of 361-287, the motion to endorse a two-state solution was defeated by 340-308.

On March 14, President Bush, eager to secure the cooperation of British prime minister Tony Blair in the upcoming war, announced the imminent release of a detailed plan for Middle East peace based on the "road map" Bush had outlined in June 2002. The thinking, primarily in London but also in Washington, was that the prospect of addressing Palestinian grievances would make the action against Iraq seem less like an assault on the Arab world as a whole. The "road map" had called for a number of steps, including cessation of violence on both sides, mutual acceptance of a two-state solution, Palestinian political reform, an Israeli freeze on settlements and eventual withdrawal from Palestinian areas, a provisional Palestinian state, and a final-status agreement on all outstanding issues by 2005 (for the full text of President's Bush’s speech of June 24, 2002, see AJYB 2003, pp. 212–16).

The major American Jewish organizations, having anticipated that no diplomatic moves on Palestine would be initiated until Iraq was dealt with, expressed surprise at the president's statement. The administration, for its part, sent mixed signals. Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser, sought to ease anxieties in a meeting with Jewish leaders held a few hours after Bush's remarks, explaining that there was no intention to hurry implementation of the "road map." But a few days later, State De-
partment spokesman Richard Boucher told reporters: "The document will be released as the 'road map'; that is the 'road map', and that will be the 'road map.'" An official later explicated this as meaning "we don't want to leave the impression that Israel has veto power and can renegotiate the 'road map' on their own terms." But this was followed by issuance of an "addendum" to the "road map" meant to reassure the Israelis by specifying that the U.S., not the other members of the "Quartet"—the UN, the EU, and Russia—would chair the monitoring committees responsible for implementing each successive phase of the process.

The Jewish community was divided over the administration's stand. Dovish voices expressed understanding for the president. In a letter initiated by the Israel Policy Forum (IPF), 14 prominent Jewish leaders—including Edgar Bronfman, former president of the World Jewish Congress, Larry Zicklin, president of New York UJA-Federation, and Marvin Lender, treasurer of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations—wrote to congressional leaders in favor of implementing the "road map." But most of the mainstream organizations were skeptical. In the pages of *U.S. News and World Report*, of which he was editor-in-chief, Mortimer Zuckerman, chairman of the Conference of Presidents, called the plan a "road map to nowhere," and the conference itself circulated material that highlighted its alleged pitfalls. On Capitol Hill, AIPAC, the preeminent pro-Israel lobby, organized a congressional letter urging the administration to insist on a serious Palestinian crackdown on violence before asking Israel for concessions. The letter garnered the signatures of a majority of House members and three-quarters of the Senate.

The battle within the Jewish community over the "road map" continued through the spring, exacerbated by fallout from the bloody weekend of May 17–19, when five suicide bombings took place killing 15 Israelis. Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice president of the Conference of Presidents, pointed to the bombings to bolster the view that Palestinian violence had to stop before anything could be demanded of the Israelis. The IPF and other peace groups disagreed, arguing, to the contrary, that the attacks demonstrated a need for greater U.S. involvement to get both sides to move toward peace. Perhaps most important to the White House was the growing concern of Christian conservatives about potential pressure on Israel: The Interfaith Zionist Leadership Summit in Washington on May 18, attended by some 400 Christians and Jews, unequivocally condemned the "road map."

On May 20, more than 100 Jewish Democrats, many of them well
known—such as actor Richard Dreyfuss, former Harvard dean Henry Rosovksy, and a number of major philanthropists—signed on to a letter prepared by the IPF urging the party's presidential candidates to endorse, or at least not oppose, the president's "road map," even in the light of the recent suicide bombings. The candidates' campaign staffs responded only by criticizing what they called Bush's lack of engagement, until recently, in the Middle East peace process, and complained privately about the signatories' interference in their campaigns.

On May 23, Prime Minister Sharon's cabinet officially approved the "road map" in principle, with Sharon, for the first time, calling Israel's occupation of 3.5 million Palestinians a "bad thing" for both sides. But the cabinet appended 14 specific reservations to its endorsement, mostly focusing on the requirement of an absolute cessation of Palestinian violence and the dismantling of terrorist groups before Israel would make any concessions (see below, pp. 155–56). Unsure of Sharon's ultimate intentions, the major American Jewish groups sought to maintain good relations with both the Bush administration and the Israelis, while leaving themselves maximum room to maneuver. AIPAC shelved its previous criticism of the president's plan, stressing instead the need to satisfy Israel's 14 reservations before proceeding with it. The American Jewish Committee and the ADL also halted their negative portrayal of the "road map" once Israel approved it, even though it took some time before these influential organizations removed arguments against the plan from their Web sites. Only the hard-line Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) remained outside the consensus, criticizing the Israeli government for its acquiescence in the "road map," a policy it called "appeasement" of the Palestinians.

Through the summer, the mainstream Jewish groups maintained their posture of formal acceptance of the Bush approach together with insistence on the Israeli conditions, though this proved a difficult balancing act. The Jewish community was taken aback when, on June 10, President Bush publicly criticized Israel for a helicopter attack in Gaza aimed at Hamas leader Abdel Aziz Rantisi that wounded him and killed two others. The ADL, one of the organizations to express dismay at Bush's remarks, went so far as to suggest a possible reconsideration of its endorsement of the "road map." Even more problematic was a visit to New York by Effi Eitam, an Israeli cabinet member and head of the National Religious Party (NRP), which represented the political interests of the settlers within the coalition. In a meeting with the Conference of Presidents on June 7, Eitam described the "road map" as worse than the Oslo
accords and said there would never be a Palestinian state. Not satisfied with stating a view at odds with the American administration and his own government, Eitam went on to claim that Richard Perle, a key Pentagon adviser, agreed with him. Perle denied Eitam's claim, but Sharon declined to rebuke his cabinet minister, leaving the American Jewish leaders unsure about the prime minister's own commitment to the "road map."

President Bush hosted Sharon and Palestinian prime minister Mahmoud Abbas in separate meetings at the White House in late July. As would become clear over the next several weeks, the administration, in these meetings, agreed to relax certain elements of the "road map" so as to strengthen both men with their own constituencies—Sharon, by promising to negotiate an operational definition of what constituted a "settlement freeze," and Abbas, by agreeing to a gradual rather than immediate disarming of terrorist groups. The organized Jewish community took the occasion of the Abbas visit to set up a meeting between him and some 50 Jewish leaders on July 24. The Conference of Presidents, AIPAC, and the Orthodox groups did not attend (speculation as to their motivation ran the gamut from scheduling conflicts to a reluctance to implicitly "support" the Palestinian), and thus the Jewish delegation was disproportionately to the political left of the communal consensus. Those who were there reported being favorably impressed by the prime minister's sincere wish for peace, but a bit disappointed about his vagueness on specifics.

American attention was so focused on Iraq that President Bush did not even mention Israel and the Palestinians in his nationally televised address of September 7. Two days later, twin suicide bombings killed 13 Israelis, and the Israeli cabinet's decision four days later, in principle, to "get rid" of Yasir Arafat (the ministers of defense, and of trade and industry, used the word "assassinate") dealt a drastic setback to the "road map." The threat to Arafat stirred great fear in American Jewish circles that Israel risked diplomatic isolation and a rupture of its vital relationship with the U.S. should anything happen to the Palestinian leader. (The American Jewish Congress, alone among the mainstream groups, argued that Israel should have free rein to deal with Arafat as it saw fit.) Although it vetoed a UN Security Council resolution taking Israel to task for threatening Arafat and demanding that it safeguard his security, the U.S. administration warned Israel not to take any action against him.

The "road map" remained alive in theory, but hardly in reality. The resignation of Prime Minister Abbas in September seemed to signal that the Palestinians could not or would not crack down on terror, and the U.S.
dropped its previously expressed objections to Israel's construction of a security fence on the West Bank. In a major speech early in November on the subject of fostering democracy in the Middle East, President Bush once again made no reference to Palestinian-Israeli relations.

Some American Jewish leaders reacted with alarm when it became known that Secretary of State Colin Powell had, on November 2, sent a letter to the architects of the so-called Geneva agreement (see below, pp. 193–94). This was a plan worked out by private citizens, Israeli and Palestinian, for a peace settlement similar to that negotiated, unsuccessfully, by Israel and the Palestinians—with the involvement of President Clinton—at Camp David and Taba in 2000–01, an approach repudiated by the Sharon government and ostensibly superseded by events. Even after a State Department spokesman explained that Powell's letter had not endorsed the specifics of the Geneva plan, the ADL and the ZOA publicly rebuked Powell.

But for some other American Jews, the breakdown of the "road map" suggested an opportunity to revive the peace movement that had been moribund since the collapse of the Taba talks and Sharon's election in 2001. The Forward newspaper (Dec. 5) endorsed the Geneva understanding because "it shows that there is a way out of Israel's deadly mess." Americans for Peace Now ran a series of newspaper ads touting the Geneva option, one bearing a headline stating that there was now "Someone to Talk With, Something to Talk About." The IPF sent a congratulatory letter Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz after he made positive reference to another nongovernmental peace plan prepared by an Israeli, Ami Ayalon, and a Palestinian, Sari Nusseibeh (see below, pp. 192–93). At the biennial of the Union for Reform Judaism (the renamed UAHC), the organization's president, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, denounced extremist settlers in Gaza and the West Bank for "trying to impose endless war on Israel and the Jewish people." Yoffie called on Israel to carry out its obligations under the "road map" by freezing settlement activity and removing illegal outposts. On December 2, the rabbinical organizations of Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Judaism joined with Christian and Muslim groups in setting up a new organization, the National Interreligious Leadership Initiative for Peace in the Middle East, dedicated to moving the U.S. toward a more active role in bringing peace to the region.

There were also voices that concluded from the stalled peace process that the two-state solution was dead, and, since the international community would not indefinitely tolerate the denial of Palestinian political
aspirations, a binational Jewish/Arab democracy, with members of both
groups enjoying equal rights, was inevitable. The New York Review of
such a scenario (see above, p. 79), written by Tony Judt, a Jewish profes-
sor at New York University. It was quickly seized upon by pro-Palestinian
elements for whom, explained David A. Harris, executive director of the
American Jewish Committee, “it’s an attempt to hoist Israel on its own
democratic petard.” And Harris warned that “this movement is a sober-
ing reminder that the current status quo can’t continue” (New York Jew-
ish Week, Nov. 21).

Ignoring the objections of the Jewish groups that criticized his letter
of praise, Secretary of State Powell met with the primary authors of the
Geneva plan, former Israeli justice minister Yossi Beilin and former Pales-
tinian information minister Yasir Abd Rabbo, in early December. Within
a few days, Howard Dean, the frontrunner for the 2004 Democratic pres-
idential nomination, spoke approvingly of the Geneva initiative. Hoping
to head off an administration endorsement, Gary Bauer, a leader of the
Christian right, called Geneva a “nightmare scenario” and warned that
espousing it would cost the administration many Christian votes in the
next election.

With the “road map” virtually dead and Geneva a nonstarter for the
Sharon government, it was unclear how Israel intended to proceed. Ed-
tor Gary Rosenblatt, writing in the New York Jewish Week (Dec. 12),
pointed to the “growing numbers of American Jews and friends of Israel
in high places” who were “frustrated, if not angered, by the lack of
progress toward peace.” American Jewish uneasiness and confusion
were in evidence when some 4,000 representatives of Jewish federations
from across the country and from Canada came together at the General
Assembly (GA) of the United Jewish Communities (UJC), which took
place this year in Jerusalem in November. They politely (but not enthu-
siastically) applauded Prime Minister Sharon’s remarks, and then lis-
tened to some of his political opponents urge them to voice their mis-
givings about the government’s path. In conversations with reporters,
the Americans expressed discomfort about Israel’s course and lack of
clarity about its policies, but added that whatever their personal doubts,
they would not speak out against Israeli policy so long as the Jewish state
was under siege. Stephen Hoffman, the UJC president and CEO, gave succ-
cinct expression to this consensus at a news conference; referring to the
Israeli government, Hoffman said, “We’re going to support whatever
they do” (Forward, Nov. 21).
A national poll conducted for the ADL at the beginning of December showed that the broader American public generally supported Israel as well, despite uneasiness over its government's course. Forty percent of the national sample sympathized with Israel, as compared to 15 percent who sympathized with the Palestinians; asked if the U.S. should back Israel even if doing so could increase the possibility of terrorist threats in this country, 62 percent responded in the affirmative and 31 percent disagreed. Nevertheless, only 42 percent thought that Israel and its prime minister really wanted long-term peace with the Palestinians, with 36 percent believing that Israel's actual intention was "to squeeze the Palestinians into the smallest territory possible."

Before the year was out, Israel's government embarked on a daring new initiative as first, Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, and then, Prime Minister Sharon, announced plans for unilateral withdrawal from Gaza and isolated West Bank settlements, and "separation" from the Palestinians, should it become clear that the latter were not serious negotiating partners (see below, pp. 188–90). This bolt out of the blue took American Jewry by surprise, and the readjustment of the community's advocacy for Israel to reflect the new policy would be a major theme in 2004.

Campus Conflicts

Jewish students had felt embattled, indeed intimidated, on many college campuses during 2002, as pro-Palestinian forces staged rallies and demonstrations decrying Israeli policies and comparing the Jewish state to South Africa under apartheid (see AJYB 2003, pp. 122–25). The university was a considerably calmer place for Jews in 2003, partly because the level of violence in Israel and territories—a significant catalyst for campus incidents—had diminished. One indication of the easing of tensions was that petitions for university divestment from Israel, a major part of the pro-Palestinian effort the previous year, were hardly mentioned in 2003.

There was a widespread feeling, as well, that Jewish students had learned from their earlier battles and were now better organized and prepared to defend Israel. AIPAC, along with Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, ran a training mission to Israel for student leaders. Two national coordinating bodies for Jewish students began operations during 2003, the Israel on Campus Coalition, made up of 26 student groups spanning the ideological gamut from Orthodox to secular, and the North American Jewish Student Alliance, an umbrella organization for
Jewish groups on 62 campuses. In addition, Jewish-Arab dialogue groups functioned smoothly at a number of universities. To mark the Israel’s 55th birthday, Jewish student activists launched a campaign to collect what they hoped would be 55,000 signatures to pro-Israel petitions on campuses across the country; they ended up with many more, and published the petitions in college newspapers.

The highlight of the year for Jewish student activism was “Israel Inspires,” a four-day celebration of the Jewish state at Rutgers University in New Jersey. Originally conceived to counter a national conference of the Palestinian Solidarity Movement planned for the Rutgers campus, “Israel Inspires” went ahead in early October even though the pro-Palestinian event was moved elsewhere. Largely funded by New Jersey’s Jewish federations, the pro-Israel conference drew some 7,000 participants from 20 campuses. Featured speakers included the governor of New Jersey and both the state’s U.S. senators.

But the widespread sense of an improved atmosphere for pro-Israel advocacy on campus was challenged by Natan Sharansky, Israel’s minister for Jerusalem and Diaspora affairs, who visited 13 American campuses in September and was appalled both by the virulence shown by demonstrators against his government’s policies and the passivity—sometimes even hostility—of much of the Jewish student body. Speaking at Rutgers just a few weeks before the “Israel Inspires” event there, Sharansky was interrupted by a pro-Palestinian Jew in the audience who shouted “End the Occupation,” and hit the minister in the face with a cream pie. At Boston University, a bomb threat almost forced cancellation of his scheduled talk. Students at Ivy League universities told him that courses on the Middle East presented only the Arab point of view, and that they feared being subject to ridicule or worse if they spoke up in class for Israel. After Sharansky returned to Israel and reported his experiences to Prime Minister Sharon, all cabinet minister were instructed to make college campuses part of their itineraries on all trips to the U.S.

However, a number of knowledgeable observers—including the interim director of Hillel, Avraham Infeld—disagreed with Sharansky’s diagnosis. They argued that students dissenting from the policies of Israel’s government (supporting a freeze on settlements, for example, or favoring restarting negotiations with the Palestinian Authority) were not necessarily anti-Israel, and suggested that a more positive approach, with greater tolerance for dissent and diversity of views within the Jewish campus community, would, in the end, strengthen Israel’s cause.

This internal Jewish debate over how to present Israel’s case on cam-
pus exploded in physical violence at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) at the end of October. After a speech by the noted Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz, an argument took place between Rachel Neuwirth, a pro-Israel activist, and the campus Hillel rabbi, Chaim Seidler-Feller, a critic of the Sharon government's policies. Apparently enraged when Neuwirth called him worse than a kapo (Jew who worked for the Nazis) for sympathizing with Palestinian grievances, Seidler-Feller allegedly pushed and kicked the woman, who complained to campus police. The rabbi subsequently apologized and agreed to attend anger-management classes.

Domestic Tensions: Money and Priorities

The widespread impression that wealthy Jewish donors gave relatively small amounts of money to Jewish causes received empirical confirmation in 2003. A study entitled "Mega-Gifts in American Jewish Philanthropy," written by Gary Tobin, Jeffrey Solomon, and Alex Karp, and sponsored by the Institute for Jewish and Community Research in San Francisco, found that 22 percent of Americans who gave a single grant of at least $10 million to a charity were Jewish. But such "mega-donors" gave, on average, just 10 percent of their philanthropic dollars to Jewish institutions.

These findings were released at a time when the Jewish community was straining to meet unforeseen demands. As the downturn in the American economy continued through 2003, unemployed Jews—many of whom had worked in middle management or high-tech—looked to synagogues, federations, and other Jewish organizations for help. They needed emergency loans to pay for basic needs and leads in finding jobs, and many felt compelled to ask for discounts on dues and tuition. In Jewish communities across the U.S., Jewish organizations of all kinds advertised their support groups, interest-free loan funds, resume banks, retraining classes, and networking opportunities. The crisis was especially sharp in the New York City area, where the disruption caused by the 9/11 attacks added an extra dimension of economic hardship.

The economic situation provided the backdrop for a serious split within the organized Jewish community over the Bush administration's plans for reducing taxes. United Jewish Communities, representing the world of the federations, argued that this was not a Jewish issue, and therefore stayed out of the battle. But the Reform and Conservative synagogue groups—the UAHC and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism—saw it
as a matter of social justice, and therefore very much a Jewish issue. They therefore announced opposition to the tax cuts, arguing that they provided disproportionate benefits for the wealthy at a time when government programs for the poor and unemployed were being cut.

The budgetary strain on Jewish communal resources also stimulated unusual attention to the salaries of the top professionals managing Jewish institutions. The October 2 issue of the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* included a survey of management of not-for-profit organizations that showed Jewish federation executives in large cities receiving salaries of around $200,000, which, combined with benefits and expense allowances, actually approached $400,000. The financial packages of executives in other Jewish organizations were similar, and both were far larger than those at comparable Christian charities. While some observers argued that the high salaries were necessary to attract talented executives, and that donors tended to take more seriously professionals who earned what they did, others considered the pay scales unconscionable at a time when the Jewish organizations were increasingly hard put to meet the needs of the unfortunate.

United Jewish Communities

United Jewish Communities (UJC) was created in 1999 through a merger of the Council of Jewish Federations, United Jewish Appeal, and United Israel Appeal to be the “central address” of American Jewry, allocating funding and determining communal priorities. But controversy persisted over its performance. Areas of dispute included the apportionment of allocations between domestic and overseas Jewish needs, and within the overseas category, Israel’s appropriate share; the degree of control exercised by the federations; the relatively weak role of the religious movements in the organization; and the failure to achieve budgetary reductions that had been expected from the merger. The postponed release of the 2001 National Jewish Population Survey, sponsored by the UJC, and the doubts cast on its validity added yet another complaint about the organization’s mode of operation (see below, pp. 114–16).

Local federations were restive. Expressing the views of many, the Jewish Federation of Greater Houston sent a letter to UJC leaders on January 31 calling that body a “national system that had lost its way,” and raised the possibility that the federation would stop paying dues. Later in the year, the United Federation of Tidewater (Virginia), which had al-
ready stopped paying dues, defied the UJC by sending its overseas money directly to the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and the Jewish Agency for Israel.

During the year, the UJC was often in the news. In January, it announced the closing of the Trust for Jewish Philanthropy, an initiative set up in 2000 to fund creative, innovative projects in the Jewish community. The reason given for the move was budgetary, but some of those involved in UJC expressed deep displeasure, especially representatives of women’s organizations who had expected the trust to become an incubator for programs to enhance the role of women in the community.

In February, the JDC, which received about 25 percent of UJC funds for its extensive programs that helped Jewish communities around the world, sent letters directly to local federations asking for additional emergency funds to be used in Argentina and the former Soviet Union, bypassing the UJC allocations process. In a February 28 letter to the JDC, UJC leaders complained that such actions “only serve to subvert our national effort.”

That same month, UJC announced that its “Renaissance and Renewal” activities—aimed at strengthening Jewish identity—would no longer be conducted together with the Jewish Educational Service of North America (JESNA), and appointed Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman to head the department. A former pulpit rabbi, Zimmerman had resigned the presidency of Hebrew Union College in 2001 after accusations of sexual misconduct led to his suspension from the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

Several times during the year, UJC and Israel locked horns. On June 1, Prime Minister Sharon unleashed a verbal attack at his weekly cabinet meeting, charging that the American Jewish organization’s use of images of starving Israelis as a fund-raising technique “harms Israel’s national strength and damages the country in the perception of Jews overseas.” Instead, the cabinet urged American Jewish philanthropies to emphasize the costs of immigrant absorption, Zionist education, and land development in their appeals to potential donors. In November came word that the UJC might cut its allocation to the Jewish Agency for Israel, since immigration absorption, which the agency paid for, had declined substantially. But Prime Minister Sharon intervened to maintain its level of funding.

The UJC launched a search for a new president in 2003; the term of the incumbent, Stephen Hoffman, was due to expire in June 2004. In April 2003, the UJC board chairman, James Tisch, president of Loew’s Corp.,
was named chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, succeeding Mortimer Zuckerman. Tisch was the first head of an umbrella organization to hold this post.

Denominational Developments

Orthodox Judaism

Yeshiva University, the flagship educational institution of American Orthodoxy, welcomed a new president in 2003, 52-year-old Richard Joel. The choice of Joel, who was neither a rabbi nor an academician, to succeed Norman Lamm—who, like the two previous presidents, was both—aroused considerable controversy in 2002 (see AJYB 2003, p. 128). Joel came to the job after a highly successful 13-year tenure heading Hillel, the Jewish campus organization. In a number of interviews with reporters, Joel avoided involvement in the modernist-vs.-traditionalist debates that roiled Yeshiva and the centrist Orthodoxy that it served. Instead, he emphasized the need to make the university more student-friendly, and spoke of utilizing the same "big tent" approach that had worked at Hillel to manage the ideological divisions within Yeshiva, an institution that included secular undergraduate and graduate divisions as well as a rabbinical school.

That rabbinical school, indeed, faced new competition from Yeshiva Chovevei Torah, founded in 2001 in New York City by Rabbi Avi Weiss, which ordained its first two rabbis in 2003. Weiss's school advertised itself as an exponent of "open Orthodoxy," emphasizing pastoral skills and the development of collegial relationships with all sectors of the Jewish community. Since both of the graduates found jobs and several students still in the program received prestigious rabbinic internships, the school's backers expressed the hope that Chovevei Torah, with its relatively liberal approach, might, over time, alter the face of the Orthodox rabbinate.

There were numerous reports during the year that Orthodox singles were having trouble finding marriage partners. The shift, in recent years, to more stringent religious standards meant a virtual end to mixed-gender social gatherings and greater reliance on introductions by third parties. This system spawned a "checklist" mentality whereby singles would not even meet unless the prospective date could satisfactorily answer, through the good offices of the intermediary, a battery of personal questions that could appear petty and irrelevant. "Who'd have ever thought," asked
Debra Nussbaum Cohen in the *New York Jewish Week* (Mar. 7), “that the type of shoes one wears would become a dating issue for anyone but a foot fetishist?” Inevitably, alternatives to the new system began springing up: Orthodox-only Webs sites for single Jews to connect via cyberspace; sessions of “eight-minute” round-robin dating, whereby one might meet, very briefly, several eligible singles in the course of an hour; and even an organization calling itself End the Madness, dedicated to finding “normal” ways for young Orthodox Jews to meet.

Challenges to Orthodoxy on the secular college campus received sensationalistic coverage in June due to an item posted on the Internet by two graduate students, one at Harvard and the other at MIT. Entitled “A Parent’s Guide to Orthodox Assimilation on University Campuses,” it sought to alert readers to the fact that even many graduates of Orthodox day schools, some of whom spent a year studying at an Israeli yeshivah before college, give up Jewish observance and belief under the influence of “the forces of campus life”—social pressures, time pressures, sexual temptation, and intellectual challenges for which they were unprepared. Ironically, this warning came at a time when American universities were showing an unprecedented degree of accommodation to the religious needs of the Orthodox.

Edah, an organization created in 1996 to further the ideology of modern Orthodoxy, held its third international conference in February in New York City. Its theme was “Relationships in the Era of Democracy and Terror,” and around 1,000 people participated. Both cochairs were women, symbolizing the central role that Orthodox feminism played in contemporary modern Orthodoxy. Indeed, considerable attention was devoted to women’s issues, especially finding ways to free *agunot*, women who were denied religious divorces by their husbands.

One item that was not on the Edah agenda came to fore in November, when communal dismay over the prospective release of Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ* (see above, pp. 75—76) brought calls for reconsidering the traditional Orthodox ban on theological dialogue with Christians. In light of a perceived need to educate Christians about why so many Jews were distraught over this cinematic portrayal of the crucifixion, Rabbi Eugene Korn, who had been interfaith director for the ADL at the onset of the Gibson affair but resigned soon thereafter, suggested that the opposition to dialogue enunciated by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik in the 1960s and still adhered to in Orthodox circles was obsolete. Korn said that Soloveitchik had never intended his ruling to be a matter of Jewish law but rather “a policy decision,” and since the Catholic
Church had drastically revised its view of Jews and now repudiated all forms of anti-Semitism, the ban should no longer apply. Within the Orthodox world, Korn was seconded in his view only by the few Orthodox rabbis already engaged in interreligious dialogue.

Speculation about the future of the Lubavitch (Chabad) Hassidic movement had been swirling since the death, in 1994, of its leader, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, at the age of 92. Although he died childless and did not designate an heir, the movement, now run in a more decentralized way from its Brooklyn headquarters, flourished. Often, it was the local Chabad rabbi who constituted the only Jewish presence in remote locations around the globe. Troubling the movement, however, was the vexed issue of messianism: an indeterminate number of Lubavitchers believed that their rabbi would return from the grave and announce himself as the messiah. Many outside the movement felt that this doctrine, so reminiscent of early Christianity, placed its adherents—and thus, arguably, much of Chabad—outside the pale of Orthodox Judaism.

Of great help in burnishing the reputation of Lubavitch was the publication, in 2003, of *The Rebbe’s Army: Inside the World of Chabad-Lubavitch*, by journalist Sue Fishkoff. A self-described nonobservant Jew who interviewed many of Chabad’s emissaries in far-off places, Fishkoff presented the movement’s outreach efforts in a highly positive light, and downplayed the significance of the controversy over messianism.

**Conservative Judaism**

The great debate in the Conservative movement over whether homosexuals might be ordained as rabbis (and also whether Conservative rabbis might perform gay commitment ceremonies) intensified during 2003. The student body of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), the Conservative rabbinical school, was thought to be largely in favor of removing the traditional taboo on gay rabbis, and in late 2002 the president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the movement’s lay arm, publicly agreed. An unscientific poll conducted early in 2003 over Ravnet, the Web site of the Conservative rabbinate, indicated that about two-thirds of the rabbis endorsed the ordination of homosexuals. Opposition came from the traditionalists in the movement, who saw no way of overriding or reinterpretting Jewish law’s condemnation of homosexuality, and from the JTS chancellor, Dr. Ismar Schorsch, who feared that pressing this issue could lead to a schism.

The ultimate decision on whether to admit known homosexuals into the rabbinical school, however, was in the hands of the movement’s Com-
mittee on Jewish Law and Standards. When it held its first meeting of the year at JTS is early March, students let their feelings be known through a “learn-in” on the topic of sexual orientation and Jewish law. In a surprising move, the committee headed off a confrontation by not elevating to its chairmanship Rabbi Elliott Dorff, a vocal gay-rights advocate who had been slated to be the new chairman. Instead, the incumbent, Rabbi Kassel Abelson, considered a traditionalist, would continue in office. While some observers saw this as a defeat for the forces of change, others took the opposite tack, suggesting that a committee decision to overturn the ban on gays would be more likely to gain acceptance if it came under the chairmanship of Abelson rather than the outspoken Dorff.

Meanwhile, for Conservative congregations throughout the country, rabbinic officiation at gay commitment ceremonies was of more immediate relevance than the sexual orientation of rabbis. Although no firm data were available, an estimated 80 Conservative rabbis defied their movement’s rule and performed such ceremonies, relying on the flexibility that the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards gave to individual rabbis in handling sensitive matters on a case-by-case basis.

Controversy of quite a different sort erupted in February, when the administration of JTS announced that students would no longer write articles of Torah commentary for *Divrei HaYamim*, a newsletter published by the school. The decision was triggered by the submission of a student article accusing Israel of “ongoing human-rights violations,” the refusal of the Office of Student Life to publish it, and the resignation-in-protest of the paid student editor. A JTS spokesperson explained that the newsletter “has never been, nor was it intended to be, a forum for political discussion.” Jill Jacobs, the offending student, complained of “the virtual absence of space . . . for open and honest discussion about Israel.”

Even as it coped with challenges from advocates of change, the Conservative movement, or at least a number of its top leaders, continued to push for a more serious commitment to prayer and ritual. April 15 was the release date for *Or Hadash*, the first Conservative prayer book with extensive historical, literary, and philosophical commentary reflecting the movement’s theology. It was the work of Rabbi Reuven Hammer, president of the Rabbinical Assembly, and was a response to complaints from some rabbis that congregant seeking a deeper prayer experience were coming to synagogue carrying the Orthodox “Artscroll” prayer book, since there was no Conservative counterpart.

The movement’s ambiguous relationship to Jewish ritual—it was officially a Halakhic movement and thus bound by traditional law, but relatively few Conservative Jews lived Halakhic lives—became the object
of embarrassing public satire in June. That was when the popular HBO television hit "Sex and the City" aired an episode in which the Jewish boyfriend of one of the lead characters, an Episcopalian woman, says that he cannot marry a non-Jew, and then orders pork. When she asks about the apparent contradiction, he replies: "I'm not kosher; I'm Conservative." Leaders of the movement complained that this was a slur, since one must keep kosher to be a good Conservative Jew. But the gap between the rules and actual behavior (some three-quarters of Conservative Jews, in a 1996 survey, reported not keeping kosher) led New York Times reporter Joyce Purnick to conclude (June 30): "Aha! Perhaps what's really going on is that 'Sex' got a bit of awkward reality right."

At the biennial convention of the movement's United Synagogue, held in Dallas in late October, strengthening Jewish observance was a major theme. To be sure, delegates were treated to a debate over the vexed issue of homosexuality, but Conservative leaders stressed the maintenance of Halakhic standards as the overriding priority for Conservative Jews. Chancellor Schorsch was especially outspoken, surprising just about everyone by declaring the movement's decision in 1950 to allow driving to the synagogue on the Sabbath a mistake; by making it unnecessary to live within walking distance of a synagogue, he argued, that permissive ruling made it impossible to create a Conservative "Shabbos community." Other Conservative rabbis sharply disagreed with his assessment.

The biennial took place under the cloud of recently released data from the latest National Jewish Population Survey indicating that the percentage of American households affiliated with a synagogue that considered themselves Conservative dropped ten points in the past decade, from 43 percent in 1990 to 33 percent in 2000 (see below, p. 115). The movement had now fallen into second place behind Reform, which had 39 percent. Reactions of Conservative leaders ran the gamut. Some denied that there had been any decline; others, who acknowledged the trend, blamed it on the difficulty of competing with Reform, which made minimal requirements and accepted people who were non-Jews according to Halakhah; and yet others talked of how difficult it was for a religiously centrist movement to articulate a clear and compelling message.

Reform Judaism

Meeting in Minneapolis in November for its biennial convention, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), which represented the 900 synagogues affiliated with the Reform movement—now the
largest stream of Judaism in America—officially renamed itself the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ). The movement thus recognized, belatedly, two changes that had occurred since the founding of the UAHC in 1873: it did not encompass all of American Jewry but only its Reform wing, and the decline of anti-Semitic stereotyping made it no longer necessary to eschew use of the word “Judaism” in favor of the sanitized designation of “Hebrew.”

An important work on the movement was published in 2003, *American Reform Judaism: An Introduction*, by Dana Evan Kaplan. Providing the first book-length treatment of contemporary Reform, Kaplan highlighted two major thrusts: a greater interest in ritual practice, and a significant commitment to outreach and inclusiveness so as to attract intermarried families. The ritual was certainly evident at the biennial in Minneapolis, where many of the participants donned kippot and prayer shawls at prayer services, which were conducted largely in Hebrew.

But the outreach thrust appeared undermined as the year began by a UAHC budget-cutting decision announced on December 15, 2002, eliminating the positions of 13 part-time regional coordinators who provided services for interfaith families. The cuts would take effect March 31, 2003. The move drew strong criticism from the 150-member Pacific Association of Reform Rabbis, rabbis from other regions of the country, and the Internet advocacy group InterfaithFamily.com. UAHC officials denied any diminution in the movement’s commitment to outreach, but, given the reality of the organization’s $2-million deficit, urged rabbis and congregations to raise the money for outreach independently. Indeed, the continuing widespread availability of outreach programs at the local level showed that Reform outreach was not dependent on regional coordinators. For example, by year’s end all 11 of the Reform synagogues in Manhattan were offering “A Taste of Judaism” (and spending the money to advertise it in the *New York Times*). A three-session program for those considering conversion to Judaism, it drew hundreds of people.

As for inclusiveness, Reform achieved two new breakthroughs in 2003. In March, Hebrew Union College (HUC), the movement’s seminary, admitted its first transgender rabbinical student. “Yes, we did have to stop and think about this situation,” explained the school’s director of admissions, “but the real question was ‘is he a qualified candidate the way others are,’ and the answer was, ‘certainly.’ ” The next month, Rabbi Janet Marder became the first female president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the Reform rabbinical organization. With her election, three of the top six CCAR posts were held by women.
The Reform commitment to inclusiveness raised a troubling dilemma for HUC when Rev. Fred Phelps, an opponent of homosexual rights, said he would picket the seminary's Cincinnati campus to protest Reform's support for the recognition of civil gay marriages. HUC canceled regular classes that day and, anticipating the arrival of Phelps, held a teach-in to discuss Jewish teachings on the equal dignity of all human beings. Phelps did not show up, and some suggested that HUC had afforded the gay-basher something of a victory by letting his empty threat disrupt the school's schedule.

Secular Judaism

Humanistic Judaism, the 40-year-old movement that explicitly repudiated the idea of a transcendent God and celebrated Judaism as a culture rather than a religion, underwent a transition with the retirement of its founder and leader. On June 27, Rabbi Sherwin Wine stepped down from his pulpit at the Birmingham Temple, in a suburb of Detroit, where he had founded the movement in 1963. There were now some 40 Humanistic congregations across the country. Wine planned to continue as dean of the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, which trained rabbis to serve such communities.

There was reason to believe that nontheistic Judaism had a future in the U.S. Recent surveys indicated that close to half of American Jews did not identify with Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, or Reconstructionist Judaism, and, according to the 2002 study of Jews in the New York area, the percentage of Jews in the metropolis who considered themselves secular or of no religion had almost doubled in ten years. With funding from Felix Posen, a philanthropist based in London, a Center for Cultural Judaism opened in New York City in 2003. It featured courses on Jewish culture, advertised the availability of grant money for university programs on secular Judaism, and sought to arouse public awareness that there were ways of living Jewishly without a religious worldview.

Denominational Relations

Reverberations over the book One People, Two Worlds, published in October 2002, continued into early 2003. The volume was made up of e-mails exchanged between two rabbis, one Reform (Ammiel Hirsch) and the other haredi Orthodox (Yosef Reinman), who came to respect if not agree with one another in the course of their correspondence. The book
was released with the understanding that the two rabbis would go on a joint 17-city promotional tour. But certain Orthodox leaders denounced the project for implying that Reform might constitute a legitimate Jewish option, and Reinman pulled out of the tour (see AJYB 2003, p. 138).

Another Orthodox-Reform contretemps occurred in late February, when the *haredi* acting mayor of Jerusalem, Uri Lupolianski, canceled a previously scheduled meeting at his office with a delegation from the HUC board of governors. The mayor's office said that he was unavailable and there was no other time he could meet with the group. Rabbi David Ellenson, the HUC president and leader of the delegation, had no doubt that Lupolianski had succumbed to pressure from the *haredi* community not to show any sign of recognition to the Reform movement. "This 'non-meeting,' " Ellenson charged, "radiates an aura of exclusion that ill serves our people" (*Forward*, Mar. 7).

On the West Coast, five years of negotiations culminated on June 2 with the establishment of an interdenominational *bet din* (religious court) for processing conversions. The regional rabbinic organizations of the Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist movements agreed upon a joint procedure whereby the candidate for conversion might study with the rabbi of his or her choice, and then undergo a ritual procedure acceptable to all the participating denominations. The Orthodox rabbinate refused to take part on the grounds that non-Orthodox rabbis, by virtue of their unacceptable theological beliefs, were not qualified to handle conversions.

In light of Orthodoxy's reluctance to accept the legitimacy of other forms of Judaism, it came as something of a shock when, in late spring, the *haredi* Agudath Israel organization called on the UJC, the secular umbrella body of the American federations, to make up the funding for newborn Israeli babies that had been cut back by the Israeli government. Such a step would, in essence, have had American Jewry, overwhelmingly non-Orthodox, subsidize the growth of *haredi* families in Israel, since these were producing most of the newborns. A *Forward* editorial (June 6) labeled this "chutzpah," and UJC commented that such an allocation was not within its mandate.

On the positive side of the ledger, a significant new interdenominational initiative took place on September 14 in the form of a day of Jewish study at the Skirball Center at Temple Emanu-El in New York City. Called Lishmah (study for its own sake) and taking inspiration from the similar British program Limmud, it featured a dozen relatively young rabbis from all of the movements presenting classes and leading discussions...
on Jewish themes. Funded by UJA-Federation of New York, it drew more than 12,000 people, and the organizers expected it to become an annual feature of the city's Jewish cultural scene. Yet despite the participation of some Orthodox rabbis and lay people, no Orthodox organization officially endorsed it.

**Fostering Jewish Identity**

Opinions continued to vary widely over the prospects for Jewish continuity in America. At one extreme, pessimists bemoaned what they saw as widespread apathy among young people about their Jewish heritage. In early May, a report sponsored by three Jewish family foundations was released, based on focus groups conducted by the noted opinion researcher Frank Luntz with young Jews in New York and Los Angeles. He found that while in most cases Jewish identity was important to these people, they felt very distant from the organized Jewish community and mainstream Jewish religion and culture. A meeting convened in New York by the Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies a few weeks later brought together 28 Jewish leaders from around the country to discuss the findings. According to journalist Gary Rosenblatt, who was present, those around the table felt that there was little to attract Jews to affiliate: the community carried out its tasks in a mediocre way, discouraged new ideas, and did not reach out to younger potential leaders. “Many of the best and brightest Jewish talents,” Rosenblatt reported participants as agreeing, “see the process as frustrating and limited...” (*New York Jewish Week*, May 30).

But a different message emerged from quarters outside the organizational mainstream. Typical of this alternative assessment was another conference in May that took place in Los Angeles under the sponsorship of the National Foundation for Jewish Culture and UCLA. It projected an upbeat picture of American Jewish life, as the 18 writers, artists, filmmakers, and scholars who served as panelists spoke enthusiastically about a renaissance of Jewish culture.

To judge by the attention lavished by the media, the growth industry of American Jewish culture was Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism. Kabbalah continued to find adherents in the most unlikely places, as celebrities, Jewish and non-Jewish—such as Madonna, Sandra Bernhard, and Mick Jagger—participated in its rituals. A number of organizations promoted and sponsored such activity. One of the best known was the Kabbalah Centre, based in New York City with 50 branches around the world,
which claimed to teach the innermost secrets of the universe. It attracted devoted followers—especially in Hollywood—and, because it sold red strings (allegedly a good-luck charm) and bottles of “holy water,” was suspected in some quarters of taking financial advantage of gullible people. Another group promoting Jewish mysticism was Aleph: Alliance for Jewish Renewal, which saw itself as transmitting the traditions of European Hassidism through religious services, classes and weekend retreats, and ordained rabbis it certified as experts in spirituality.

Certain religious observances discarded by the great majority of American Jews were making a comeback. The immersion of women in a mikveh (ritual bath), an element of Orthodox practice long ago abandoned as primitive and sexist by non-Orthodox Jews, was now on the upsurge, not just for married women to mark the menstrual cycle, but for anyone going through a crisis or change in personal circumstances. Mikveh, in the eyes of its new enthusiasts, was “an emotional, spiritual experience ... a full-body experience, emerging anew and starting anew” (New York Jewish Week, Nov. 28). Sabbath observance got a good press as well, perhaps still benefiting from the publicity given to Sen. Joseph Lieberman’s regular Saturday timeouts from campaigning when he ran for vice president in 2000. Surely no one a generation earlier could have imagined that an article with the title “Bring Back the Sabbath: Why Even the Most Secular Need a Ritualized Day of Rest,” by Judith Shulevitz, would appear on March 2, 2003, not in a Jewish publication, but in the New York Times Sunday Magazine.

There were other advocates of Jewish revival who did not stress the mystical or the ritual. One was Rabbi Irwin Kula, president of CLAL, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, who, together with a staff of other CLAL rabbis, conducted classes and conferences around the country aimed at buttressing Jewish identity by showing the depth and relevance of Jewish wisdom for the society at large. Kula explained, “Rather than use Judaism to make Jews Jewish, we are using the spirit of Judaism to enhance the ethical culture of America. The byproduct of that is that Jews will want to become Jews.” On May 4, Kula launched “Simple Wisdom,” a 13-week television show on PBS, to publicize his approach. A more radical strategy for Jewish renewal came from media critic Douglas Rushkoff, whose book, Nothing Sacred: The Truth about Judaism, argued against mysticism—indeed, against religion entirely—and for a completely secular understanding of the Jewish tradition. Rushkoff urged Jews to stop worrying about their falling numbers and rising intermarriage rates, and instead stress the social teach-
ings inherent in Judaism. He wrote: "Judaism doesn’t teach faith, it teaches active participation. . . Judaism’s emphasis on iconoclasm, abstract monotheism and social justice," he went on, "makes it a potentially valuable resource to a world on the brink of adopting their opposites." Rushkoff drew large audiences of young people at speaking engagements to promote his book. Critics charged that his approach could lead to the disappearance of Judaism as a distinct religion, a possibility he acknowledged but viewed with equanimity.

Another initiative to make Judaism relevant to the young and the secular was Nextbook, a project funded by the Keren Keshet-Rainbow Foundation. This involved, first, the preparation of attractively designed reading lists of some 300 Jewish books of all kinds, and sending the lists, together with copies of the books, to public libraries around the country. There were also public readings by a number of the featured authors in various communities, a Web site, and plans for a series of new books by secular Jewish intellectuals dealing with topics in Jewish history and thought. The entire enterprise was guided by a desire to present the Jewish literary heritage as “nonthreatening.”

The question of how to transmit Jewish identity in America was addressed dramatically on November 19 at the General Assembly of the UJC, meeting in Jerusalem, by philanthropist Michael Steinhardt, who announced the creation of a “Fund for Our Jewish Future.” Steinhardt pledged $10 million to start it, and challenged others to come up with an additional $90 million. A long-time supporter of innovative approaches to encourage Jewish continuity (such as Makor, a Jewish cultural center in Manhattan, and Birthright Israel, which provided free trips to Israel for Jewish young people), Steinhardt declared that Jewish education was the highest priority for world Jewry—even more important than fighting anti-Semitism. He asserted that, with the exception of the Orthodox, the Jewish religious streams had failed, and proposed an educational emphasis on Jewish peoplehood rather than religion. In his presentation, Steinhardt recommended only one specific program: a voucher to be given each Jewish family upon the birth of child, to be used later for Jewish nursery-school education and, later on, a trip to Israel.

Although his speech in Jerusalem was greeted with a standing ovation, Steinhardt’s proposal drew criticism on numerous fronts. The ADL, articulating the sentiments of the defense organizations, did not feel that Jewish education should come at the expense of weakening the battle against anti-Semitism. Even many who agreed with Steinhardt’s cultural priorities criticized him for not consulting federation leaders and educa-
tors before launching his campaign. The Orthodox, for their part, argued that secular Jewish education was a waste of time and resources. Their view was largely embraced by Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, who, in a piece titled "Steinhardt's Folly" (New York Jewish Week, Dec. 26), claimed that "there will be no educational renewal without religious renewal, and neither will happen without the equal partnership and full cooperation of the synagogue world."

The Steinhardt proposal got its most enthusiastic welcome from the Center for Cultural Judaism, which promoted the teaching of secular forms of Jewishness. Felix Posen, its chief financial backer, promised $10 million from his foundation for Steinhardt's fund, but only if half the total raised were targeted to unaffiliated Jews who identified as secular.

Fundamental questions that surely had to be answered in launching any such large-scale initiative were who, in 2003, was a Jew, and how he or she differed from any one else. The full acceptance of Jews in American life and the widespread phenomenon of intermarriage had created a situation in which one of the 2004 Democratic presidential aspirants was a Jew, and four others had Jewish family connections (for details, see above, pp. 38–39). Blurring of cultural lines was also proceeding apace. "Forget Rye Bread, You Don't Have to Be Jewish to Eat Kosher," was the headline of an article on the front page of the New York Times business section (June 28), which described the new availability of kosher products of all kinds in chain stores serving communities around the country with few if any Jews; 28 percent of the country's population, according to a survey conducted by Mintel Consumer Intelligence, reported to have knowingly purchased a kosher product. And just a month earlier (May 31), the Times reported on a trend with potentially revolutionary implications for the future: the number of Americans who identified as Jews without having been born Jewish or converting was growing steadily; many of them were married to Jews.

Several Jewish cultural events during the year were of particular note. "Entertaining America," an exhibit at the Jewish Museum in New York, was devoted to the central role of Jews in American entertainment from the early nickelodeons through Seinfeld. It provided considerable information about the great contributions Jews made to the industry, as well as insight into the changing image, and self-image, of Jews in America.

Launching the commemoration to mark 350 years of Jewish settlement in North America (the first boatload arrived in New Amsterdam in September, 1654), the Milken Family Foundation announced the creation of the Milken Archive of American Jewish Music that would produce and
make available recordings of the classics of the community's musical past, ranging from cantorial selections to klezmer, songs of the Yiddish theater, operas, and classical pieces. To launch the project, the Jewish Theological Seminary, in cooperation with the archive, held a gala five-day conference, "Only in America," in November, which featured performances and discussions about the history and the future of Jewish music in America.

In March, the City University of New York, the Feinstein Center for American Jewish History at Temple University, and the American Jewish Committee sponsored a conference in New York City on the evolution and impact of Commentary magazine since its founding in 1945. Among other themes, speakers analyzed the magazine's political shift from liberal to neoconservative and its influence on Washington policymakers.

Holocaust-Related Issues

The Jewish community was torn, in 2003, over how to distribute the funds collected for Holocaust survivors that were "discretionary," not earmarked for specific individuals or institutions. The formula used for decades by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (popularly known as the Claims Conference)—80 percent for needy survivors and the other 20 percent for projects of remembrance, education, and documentation—came under fire from the Jewish Council for Public Affairs in February, as the JCPA plenum voted that all of the money should go to indigent survivors.

The Claims Conference responded by promising to review its procedures, but at the meeting of its board of directors in July the old 80/20 division was approved once more, unanimously, enraging a number of the survivor organizations, which asserted that there were many, old and sick, who urgently needed help. Their position was buttressed on October 2, when Judah Gribetz, the special master assigned to the litigation involving Swiss banks that held the money of Holocaust-era Jews, argued for giving all the unclaimed funds, $668 million, to survivors.

But Gribetz raised a hornet's nest by suggesting that the great bulk of the money should go to survivors living in Eastern Europe, who, he felt, were most in need. American survivor groups challenged this assessment and demanded that at least 25 percent go to people living in the U.S., on the grounds that a quarter of all survivors were there. Complicating the picture even more were claims from Israel that its survivor population was
being shortchanged, and a demand from the Israeli government for “fair” representation on the governing bodies of the Claims Conference.

Another dispute during the year had to do with the construction of a memorial at the site of the Belzec death camp, where some 600,000 Jews were murdered. The place had been left in its original abandoned state since the end of World War II. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington launched the idea for such a memorial, and the plan was carried out under the sponsorship of the American Jewish Committee in cooperation with the government of Poland. Even though eminent rabbis were consulted to ensure that the work would not desecrate the remains of the dead, Rabbi Avi Weiss of New York launched a media campaign against it in 2002, calling the monument a “desecration.” A Holocaust survivor filed suit against construction, and when the suit was withdrawn in July 2003, Weiss himself launched another suit. On July 30, Weiss visited the site and, claiming that there were pieces of bone strewn all across the area, sought symbolically to block the work, and then visited the president of Poland to complain. Completion of the project and its official dedication were scheduled for 2004.

The ongoing salience of the Holocaust in American culture was underlined on March 23, when the film The Pianist won three Academy Awards: for director, lead actor, and screenwriter. (Director Roman Polanski could not attend the ceremony since he was a fugitive from the U.S.) The Pianist told the story of Wladyslaw Szpilman, a pianist who survived the Warsaw Ghetto largely because of his musical ability. Another Holocaust-themed movie, Nowhere in Africa, about Jewish refugees who resettled in Kenya, won for best foreign-language film.

On November 2, some 7,000 people, including about 2,300 survivors, gathered in Washington to mark the tenth anniversary of the opening of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. The highlight was an address by Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, who told his fellow survivors: “Close your eyes and see the invisible faces of those we have left behind or who have left us behind as witnesses. Our presence here today is our answer to their silent question. We have kept our promise. We have not forgotten.”

LAWRENCE GROSSMAN