

## The Jewish Studies Professor as Communal Leader

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The much maligned, though oft-cited, National Jewish Population Survey of 2000–2001 (not fully released until 2003) has done much to rekindle the twentieth century debate regarding the role and place of Jewish Studies programs in both the university and general Jewish communities. That survey found that “among current Jewish college and graduate students, 41% report that they have taken a Jewish studies class as part of their coursework to date.”<sup>1</sup> As you might imagine, Jewish organizational sponsors of the NJPS, along with observers of the American Jewish scene, both lay and rabbinic, were quick to celebrate these findings. After all, the organized Jewish community has been obsessed with “Jewish continuity” ever since the publication of the previous demographic survey in 1990. What better proof could there be that this continuity-fixation was ‘working,’ than the encouraging news that today’s young Jews are studying Judaica at the university level? Since the announcement of these findings, North American Jewish groups and foundations have intensified their efforts to capitalize on this unprecedented trend.<sup>2</sup>

Not surprisingly, even the specter of the organized Jewish world manipulating Jewish Studies for its own purposes causes the scholarly community

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<sup>1</sup>*The National Jewish Population Survey 2000–01*: United Jewish Communities, September 2003.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Nacha Cattán, “Judaic Studies Classes See Enrollment Boom,” *Forward* Internet edition (January 23, 2004).

to grow quite concerned. In the aftermath of these recent efforts, many in our ranks, responding almost instinctively, have invoked the same concerns first articulated by our predecessors in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, in language which is strikingly similar—to wit, the imperative of reinforcing those carefully crafted boundaries of demarcation which zealously separate the scholarly community from the world of the synagogue, the Jewish school, the federation, and the pantheon of national Jewish organizations. Calls to remain vigilant against parental cooption, donor vanities, rabbinic encroachment, and the general anti-intellectualism of the philanthropic community continue to be heard throughout the academy. Assuring that scholarship does not become the “handmaiden” of the organized Jewish community remains a mandate for many within the Jewish Studies professoriat.<sup>3</sup>

As a result, substantial numbers of Jewish Studies scholars remain, as the late Daniel Elazar once observed, “ambivalent about their role as Jewish leaders.” They prefer “to identify fully with the academic community” and “to distance themselves from things Jewish aside from the strictly academic.”<sup>4</sup>

To be sure, Jewish Studies professors are not the only ones who are ambivalent about whether scholars ought to be considered *leaders* of the American Jewish community. The almost total exclusion of Jewish Studies professors from the last fifteen year’s worth of surveys and analyses claiming to study “American Jewish leaders,” for example, should leave little doubt as to where the academic community stands in the leadership hierarchy.<sup>5</sup>

Notwithstanding its enormous growth and popularity on campuses across America, the impact of Jewish Studies outside of the university remains negligible at best.<sup>6</sup> With the exception of some highly popularized subject areas, serious Jewish scholarship has failed to make more than a superficial impression upon the policies, orientations, and value systems of the American Jewish community, its lay leaders, philanthropists, professionals and clergy.

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<sup>3</sup>See *Sh’ma*, December 2002.

<sup>4</sup>Daniel Elazar, “The Professor as Jewish Spiritual Leader,” *Conservative Judaism*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Summer 1986), p. 10.

<sup>5</sup>See for example: Gerald B. Bubis, ed., *The Director Had a Heart Attack and the President Resigned—Board Staff Relations for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 1999), Earl Raab, ed., *American Jews In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century—A Leadership Challenge* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), and Jacob Ukeles, *American Jewish Leadership: A Study* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1991).

<sup>6</sup>On the explosion of Jewish Studies in American universities, see Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 329.

When American Jewry engages in the processes of self-governance, whether in synagogues, federations, community relations groups, or social service agencies, the seat at the table traditionally reserved for the scholar often remains vacant. As our colleague Steven Zipperstein observed:

It remains difficult to ignore that, with few exceptions, the entire ... enterprise of Jewish Studies ... has had little impact on the ways in which the Jews around us think, on their reading patterns, or on the ideas they care about or disparage. I don't doubt our impact on our students ... but it would be difficult to identify a single major issue in Jewish life that significant numbers of even otherwise well-educated Jews—including rabbis—think about differently today because of recent contributions of Jewish scholarship.<sup>7</sup>

Without romanticizing the past, we must acknowledge that such a situation stands in sharp contrast to earlier leadership models. As Stuart Cohen has suggested, and as I have documented in my own research, for most of Jewish history, the functions of self-government were *shared* amongst and between a tripartite matrix of leadership typologies: scholarly, religious, and political leaders who fought over, but ultimately shared power in Jewish communities.<sup>8</sup> Each leadership paradigm asserted its own covenantal authority, vying for preeminence. While the precise nature of these prototypes has evolved and metamorphosed over the centuries, reflecting new realities and circumstances, a consistency and continuity of function emerge within each of the three models. Thus, for example, despite the fact that the *talmidei hakhamim* of the talmudic period were as different from the prophets as post-Enlightenment Jewish studies scholars are from the medieval *gedolim*, it is still possible to see each of these as authentic representatives of Jewish scholarship.

Then, as now, each of the three categories of leadership advanced and defended assiduously its own view of the Jewish world, without apology or compromise. Prior to the modern epoch, however, such efforts were tempered by a recognition that power has to be shared. In order to be a duly-constituted Jewish community, all three interests—scholarly, political, and religious—had

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<sup>7</sup>Steven J. Zipperstein, "Separate Tables: Jewish Studies at the Edge," *Sh'ma* Internet edition (December 2002).

<sup>8</sup>See Stuart A. Cohen, "The Concept of the Three *Ketarim*: Their Place in Jewish Political Thought and Implications for Studying Jewish Constitutional History," in Daniel J. Elazar, *Kinship and Consent: The Jewish Political Tradition and Its Contemporary Uses* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997), pp. 47–76, and Hal M. Lewis, *Models and Meanings in the History of Jewish Leadership* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2004) *passim*.

to have a voice and a place at the table of communal decision-making. To be sure, the locus of communal authority oscillated from one leadership type to another, and it was not uncommon for individual communal leaders to represent multiple sources of power.<sup>9</sup> Over time, however, this tri-part system militated against the exclusive domination of one segment, and assured, however contentiously, a rich and diverse tapestry of communal governance; a tapestry in which the scholarly, political, and spiritual interests of the polity were at the same time individuated *and* interdependent.

In our day, however, no such tapestry exists. In modern America, the traditional matrix has become a pyramid, in which power is held disproportionately by a philanthropic sector whose values are decidedly non-scholarly. In American Jewish communal governance today, scholarship is barely acknowledged, let alone taken seriously as an authentic component of the leadership triumvirate. Sadly, this is almost as true in the American synagogue as it is in the communal organization. In a world in which building campaigns, membership figures, and fundraising achievements are the predominant metrics of success, the Jewish scholar has all but been relegated to the periphery. Ironically, at precisely the same time that the American Jewish establishment has fully embraced the concept of expert counsel, it has distanced itself from the authoritative voice of Jewish scholarship. Today, synagogues hire speech coaches for their rabbis, federations employ management consultants for their executives, advocacy groups use experts to enhance their market penetration, and fundraisers seek the advice of development specialists. These same individuals and organizations, however, would never think of accessing the expertise of the Jewish Studies community when formulating policies on an array of communal issues, from antisemitism to Zionism. Is it any wonder then that many serious Jewish scholars feel “ambivalent about their role as Jewish leaders” and choose to remain isolated from the *gashmiut*, the more temporal concerns of the general Jewish world?

Plausible as it might be to explain these aberrant patterns of communal governance as inevitable consequences of modernity’s discontinuities, doing so renders powerless the very individuals who have the capacity to effectuate an alternate approach. The real issue is not whether historical and sociological forces have conspired to prevent a return to shared power. No, the question to

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<sup>9</sup>For a particularly interesting example of the latter, drawn from the early twentieth century, see Jonathan D. Sarna, “Cyrus Adler and The Development of American Jewish Culture: The ‘Scholar-Doer’ as a Jewish Communal Leader,” *American Jewish History*, Vol. 78, No. 3 (March 1989): 382–394.

be considered is whether those currently occupying positions of authority in Jewish communities, including Jewish Studies professors, have the vision and the will to create a more authentic model of communal organization.

It seems to me that current realities actually afford the opportunity to arrest this extended pattern of dysfunctional leadership and allow for the possibility of restoring greater equilibrium within the organizational power structure. For all the popular talk about the appalling rates of Jewish illiteracy among American Jewry's organizational heads, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have witnessed a few signs suggesting that a re-valuing of serious Jewish learning in communal governing structures is neither totally illusive nor completely elusive. In recent years, synagogues and federations have made considerable strides in affirming that those who hold titled positions within their organizations ought to be enrolled in on-going programs of Jewish study. The desire of many American Jews, including those who occupy positions of prominence, to participate in one or more of the multi-year adult learning opportunities which have arisen over the past decade and a half, is hardly fortuitous. Many of these individuals seek a greater Jewish understanding, precisely because of their roles as "leaders" of the community. While I personally oppose labeling these programs as *leadership* education, and while we would all suggest that a two-year literacy course hardly qualifies as sophisticated academic study, we must not fail to see the symbolism and the opportunity inherent in the growing popularity of serious adult Jewish learning.

There are other indicators, as well, which merit our consideration. A study of communal funding patterns across North America leaves little doubt that in community after community, the appreciation for and financial support of most forms of Jewish education has increased steadily since 1990. Moreover, in that National Jewish Population Survey I referred to earlier, analysts found that university level Jewish Studies courses are now consistently attracting young people with little or no prior Jewish education. However one may wish to interpret the data—as a matter of increased funding, proliferating programs, or even in some other more cynical fashion—the reality is that, as Steven Cohen of Hebrew University has noted, in the last ten years, it has become increasingly acceptable to be Jewishly educated.

I am not suggesting that the Jewish world has suddenly rotated 180 degrees, supplanting fundraising prowess with scholarly acumen as the community's top priority. Nor am I arguing that "dabbling" in Jewish learning is even remotely related to serious scholarship. I would suggest, however, that relative to the past hundred years or more, the opening decade of the twenty-first century affords us a more receptive climate in which to rethink the place of scholarship in Jewish communal governance.

To do so, however, those who are currently vested in the regnant system must affirm a commitment to the principle of power-sharing in community leadership. A trifurcated model, in which the three paradigms never intersect, must be exposed as both inauthentic and ineffective. When religious principles are considered irrelevant to fundraising campaigns, when there is no scholarly input into the allocation of community resources, and when administrative issues are dismissed as undeserving of learned insights, the Jewish people is being deprived of meaningful leadership on all counts.

To be clear, the goal is not to make lay leaders into Ph.D.s, or rabbis into executives, or professors into pastoral counselors. The goal is to guarantee that when Jewish communities plan strategies, contemplate policies, and effect decisions, the voice of the “*talmid hakham*” will be heard alongside the voices of the “*parnas*” and the “*rav*”—not to dominate, but to elevate the level of communal discourse.

I acknowledge that some may resist calling today’s Jewish Studies professors “*talmidei hakhamim*.” To be sure, we come from a variety of backgrounds and trainings. Many have very little formal Jewish learning. As Ivan Marcus has noted, “It is no longer necessary to know Hebrew, let alone the fullness of Jewish civilization, to function” as a successful Jewish Studies academic.<sup>10</sup>

While the ramifications of this issue are significant, and the subject itself demands its own serious consideration, the fact that today’s Jewish Studies faculties often lack a deep grounding in classical Jewish sources does not alter the realities that many of these same individuals are looked upon, and often serve, as important Jewish Studies figures within the university and beyond. That fact alone must compel them to consider their responsibilities to the broader Jewish community.

Scholarship has much to contribute to the Jewish world outside the portals of the academy as well as inside. The congregations, federations, and Jewish organizations in our communities ought to look upon Jewish Studies professors as communal leaders—not merely programmatic opportunities. Far beyond the particulars of a given discipline, the judgments, insights, and perspectives of the academic community should be critical components in the collective process of voluntary self-governance. Whether the debate pertains to: funding a start-up camp for Israeli and Palestinian children on the West Bank, selecting a new prayer-book for the synagogue, strategizing interfaith dialogue with the Christian and Moslem communities, or contemplating the

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<sup>10</sup>Ivan G. Marcus, “Judaic Studies in University and Jewish Institutional Settings in America,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, vol. 3 (1966): 140.

creation of a Jewish hospice, no Jewish community should deliberate its significant issues, absent the leadership of credible scholars working side-by-side influential rabbis and respected communal executives.

I do not advocate tokenism here, nor am I recommending every synagogue or Hadassah chapter place a Jewish Studies scholar on retainer. I do contend, however, that in order to create synthesized, holistic Jewish communities in twenty-first century America, scholarship must be woven into the fiber of communal leadership. The contribution which individual scholars can make to their congregations, federations, or organizations may have less to do with their specific areas of expertise, and a great deal more to do with demonstrating by example: how to strategize and problem solve, how to research and investigate, how to critique and evaluate, and ultimately, how to contextualize and conceptualize the Jewish experience. As scholars, Jewish Studies professors have been trained to appreciate subtleties of understanding. By definition, they are accustomed to probing analyses. They understand the value of tenacity and the shortcomings of a quick-fix mentality when evaluating options and crafting intelligent communal policy. Those who labor in the academy have much to teach about skepticism in the face of oversimplification, and about openness in the face of challenging new ideas. Theirs is a focus on both the limitations and the possibilities inherent in Jewish life. The depth and breadth of their work serve to highlight the vitality and diversity of Jewish history, and stand as much-needed antidotes to routinized and monolithic understandings of Jewish culture and religion.



It is undeniably true that modernity has galvanized the distinctions between the scholarly class and others who hold positions of authority within the Jewish community. Where once an appreciation for the intrinsic value of Jewish learning informed even the plutocrats, today that is rarely the case. Increasingly, ours is an epoch typified by eponymous foundations leveraging communal policy while advancing the personal visions of wealthy philanthropic families. As a result, the traditional functions of leadership in our communities remain sharply divided. The eleemosynary establishment remains to a great extent unaware of, and uninterested in, serious scholarship. The pastoral and spiritual priorities of the rabbinate and the American synagogue leave little time other than an occasional weekend for serious educational pursuits, and the academic world has generally chosen to avoid what it perceives to be the pedestrianism of organized American Jewry.

Understandable as these centrifugal trajectories may be, I have tried to argue that they are inauthentic and ineffective for governing our twenty-first

century communities. The fact that Jewish Studies professors often see Judaism and the Jewish experience in a radically different way from either congregational rabbis or federation leaders is a good thing, not a negative. The presence of these divergent perspectives ought not be used to silence the scholarly voice or to justify self-exclusion from communal affairs. Arguably, the fact that the *mélange* of Jewish communal organizations and congregations have priorities that do not generally include scholarship is precisely the reason that the academic community must have a voice within the governing structures of the polity.

As the field of Jewish Studies has matured over the years, there has been a growing recognition among our colleagues that the emphasis on overspecialization within subdisciplines, designed to enhance credibility within the university, must also be accompanied by an embrace of what Michael Fishbane has called the “whole of Jewish Studies as the organic framework within which . . . academic research and teaching is conducted.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, I would argue that traditional emphases on academic integrity, dispassion, and independence must be coupled with a commitment to appropriate communal involvement. To be sure, the congregational and organizational worlds must do their part. Respected Jewish Studies faculty should be invited to serve on standing committees and boards, as well as ad-hoc think-tanks and blue-ribbon panels. They should be called upon to assist with continuing professional development and staff training. Rabbis, senior executives, and prominent philanthropists should seek their counsel on issues of relevance, and together they should strategize other ways in which to organically incorporate scholarly insights and perspectives into the on-going programs and activities of Jewish life.

At the same time, however, we must be willing to do our part, as well. On those occasions when the organized Jewish community does reach out, we must seek to find the right balance between detachment and communal activism. Here, I am not talking about simply agreeing to give a periodic lecture, which while significant, hardly advances us down the road toward meaningful synthesis and power-sharing. We must be willing to define ourselves as something more than disinterested scholars whose professional loyalty begins and ends with our own chosen discipline. We must be willing to take risks, not with our integrity or our research standards, but risks on behalf of the Jewish people. The kinds of risks that come when we occasionally place ourselves and

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<sup>11</sup>Michael Fishbane, “The Academy and the Community,” *Judaism* 138:35:2 (Spring 1986): 149.

our work in a communal setting; a setting in which we are not the exclusive authority, and scholarship is not the sole operative value. It means agreeing to serve on boards or commissions which need our advice, even if the experience is at times less than satisfying, or even exasperating. It means a willingness to be supportive of serious and credible Jewish educational initiatives, even if they lack the rigor of full-time graduate studies. Finally, it means writing and speaking out—in popular venues as well as scholarly ones—sometimes in support of, and sometimes in opposition to, matters of communal policy, because we are part of a longstanding tradition in which the scholar has always stood as both a part of and apart from the communal infrastructure. Let us be clear, when the once-legitimate fears of an incipient movement cause contemporary academics to distance themselves from the institutions of American Jewry, we are unwittingly emboldening those who would silence the voice of the scholar altogether. Viewing American Jewry's devaluation of scholarship as yet another reason to avoid the organized Jewish community has little long-term benefit either for academic Jewish scholarship or for the polity at large. Rather, by our willingness to engage in communal activity with integrity, we will make it abundantly clear that Jewish scholars are neither toys to be manipulated nor relics to be isolated. Most importantly, our leadership will help restore the crown of scholarship to the Jewish people.