

# Introduction

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**D**reaming and planning strike most of us as inimical to each other. Planning—the focused action of applying what we know and what we can do to what we want to achieve—seems so concrete. Dreaming, by contrast, seems soft. Imagination—images that are the product of fantasy—seems far removed from the calculated measures that can affect the future. Yet I believe that dreaming and planning go hand in hand.

This book is about imagining the Jewish future because only imagination can inspire the images, ideas, and feelings from which can emerge the motivating vision needed to shape our future. Every student of political science knows the power of “creating facts.” Things that are unthinkable before they are done become the basis for reorienting everything else thereafter. This is true of the effects of wars and inventions no more than of new ideas. When the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the “separate but equal” doctrine in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the once unthinkable process of integration began in America’s schools.

Visions and dreams can also change history. When in reaction to the Holocaust and a variety of post–World War II events the United Nations voted for partition and allowed the creation of the State of Israel, the prime cause was a 2,000-year-old dream. Thus imagination, ideas and hopes can do much more than shape plans; they can motivate the planners to fulfill them. The goal of this book is not to plan based on what we know. It is to take the time for imagining the Jewish future as we wish it would be.

We cannot know what the future will bring. Yet most efforts at preparing for the future assume a certain knowledge, as if to place odds on what will be. That assumption is the basis for strategic planning, which attempts to anticipate problems and devise ways to overcome those new difficulties and challenges. Though the goal is to help us keep up in a world changing with increasing speed, planning often fails to predict many key changes with which we have to cope.

Forty years ago who would have predicted the impact of television, computers, and jet travel on the average American’s life-style? And who would have predicted the enormous economic influence of Japan, the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism in Iran, or the move away from communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe? Efforts to predict the technological and political future

rarely meet with much success. The way that cultures regenerate themselves is just as difficult to anticipate. At the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, who would have predicted that 1,000 years later rabbinic Judaism would be flourishing? And who 100 years ago would have thought plausible the existence of a Jewish state where Hebrew is the daily language and Jerusalem is the capital? Nor did most Jewish leaders realize 40 years ago the full extent to which the Holocaust had seared the European and American Jewish psyche. Or how the existence of Israel would shape the identity of every American Jew. Equally unpredicted is the renewed desire for Jewish belonging and spiritual sustenance, which is steadily becoming more common today. These examples should lead us to distrust the perennial cry of each generation that its successor is more degenerate, dissolute, and destructive of society than any before in history. The future seems obvious only when it has become the past.

This book is not about prediction. Instead, the writers are together attempting to imagine the Jewish future. Imagining here means conjuring up images of what we wish the Jewish world were like right now. This kind of dreaming is critical to a different kind of planning—normative planning, or idealized design, an approach discussed by Russell Ackoff in *Creating the Corporate Future*. Normative planning requires us to agree on a picture of what we would like to become and to acknowledge the seriousness of the problems we face. The gap between the current situation and the one we wish we were in is the planning gap. Filling it requires us to describe the impediments to living our vision. Such impediments may be political, economic, sociotechnical, or scientific. Once the impediments have been identified, we can determine what it will take to overcome them and construct a plan with the means to do so. At that point the vision may need to be adjusted slightly to fit what we are capable of accomplishing. The resulting plan gives us a way of approaching the future that contains the elements of transformation.

We can consciously shape our tomorrows only if we know what we want them to be. That is why it is so important to imagine the Jewish future as we wish it would be, face the impediments to our visions, and energize the leaders of the Jewish community so that they plan to live in the light of our shared visions. Intended to aid in that process, the essays in this volume were prepared for a conference sponsored by the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in December 1988, which laid the groundwork for the planned launching of RRC's Institute for the Jewish Future. Through policy studies, conferences, and consulting for Jewish organizations, the institute hopes to suggest new approaches to the moral, cultural, political, and religious issues confronting the American Jewish community.

Each of the essays included here addresses issues relevant to the institute and to anyone interested in the future of American Jewry. Together they portray a critical reality about the Jewish experience—the interrelatedness of all of the aspects of Jewish experience and culture. It is obvious that American Jewry has

been profoundly shaped by life in the United States. Patterns of education, employment, homes and neighborhoods, leisure-time activities, family structure, and commitment to autonomy are just a few of the characteristics that American Jews have increasingly come to share with their fellow citizens.

But it is no less true that American Jews remain somewhat different from other Americans. Despite their high level of integration and assimilation, American Jews continue to have unique patterns that depend upon complex and interlocking elements of Jewish ethnicity, religion, and culture. It is true that changes in American culture mean changes for Jews. It is also true that changes in any part of Jewish culture contain the seeds of change in all other parts. Thus, for example, the rise of ethnicity in America has increased the impact of the emergence of the State of Israel, which has increased commitment to the use of Hebrew in synagogues. Thus the dreams, impediments, and concerns that appear to be particular to one aspect of culture need to be fit together to build a unified vision.

### Autonomy and Personal Fulfillment

The values of autonomy and personal fulfillment in American culture have had a huge impact on American Jews. Those values play powerful roles in moving us away from the strong model of community that still existed a hundred years ago in Europe. They move us toward the very weak notion of community characteristic of American Jewry, something that Arnold Eisen talks about at some length in his essay. Those same values are attached to the fragility of Jewish neighborhoods and the breakdown of the family, which in turn has had, and will continue to have, a major impact on Jewish identity formation, as Egon Mayer points out. To some extent, the breakdown in community has negatively affected the availability of sophisticated audiences for Jewish poets, dramatists, and others in artistic endeavors—a situation that Marcia Falk, Richard Siegel, and Omus Hirshbein discuss. But the fact that so many Jews live between cultures and experience alienation in such specific ways may help to encourage creativity by bringing a wide range of artistic techniques and experiences together with a fresh look at Jewish living.

One important response to the problems associated with the breakdown in Jewish neighborhoods and families lies in family education. Family education can focus effectively on inculcating values and practices in entire family units, an approach that Jonathan Woocher, Kathy Green, and Joseph Reimer explore in their essays. We clearly have reached a watershed in Jewish identity to which this shift in tactics responds. No longer can we assume that the generation of the parents has a way of Jewish living with which they themselves are comfortable. The knowledge and observance levels of Jewish parents are, in fact, often a sore spot. More parents than ever want something for themselves, often something to which they have had little or no previous exposure. That desire is both a hope

and a challenge. If we dream of a vibrant Jewish community, we are dreaming of active and Jewishly educated adults. Given what is possible in religious schools, for the most part that means adults educated *as* adults. We must rethink the role of Jewish schools, their relationship to parents and to educational opportunities within the Jewish community as a whole. Education is the key not only to richer Jewish lives for adults and families; it is also a key to strengthening Jewish community.

The popularization of *havurot* suggests that the desire for community is widespread. That so many synagogue *havurot* are casual in their educational commitments, meeting only monthly, may reflect the lack of groundwork that could support greater commitment. Or it may reflect a relatively low interest on the part of most Jews for greater commitment to community. Opportunities for community such as *havurot* deserve full development, for greater commitment to community is a critical factor in Jewish revival. Such commitment will have to be based on a voluntary curbing of autonomy. The development of theological and moral arguments that provide a basis for community is critical to such a revival. But these arguments will be of little use unless the educational vehicles exist to popularize them, unless the organizational structures exist to support that reinvigorated community. The benefits that such belonging brings must justify the sacrifices. Are such hopes phantoms? That depends partly upon whether Jews choose to believe in them and support the efforts to make them a reality. Unless the effort is made, no one will be certain of the nature or strength of the impediments. And if more intensive community existed, would it not provide more support for the embattled family's many current forms? That is certainly what has happened in my neighborhood—but we won't know more without diverse efforts in this area.

There are those who argue that broad structural issues such as employment opportunities and the system of secular education are the chief culprits in the weakening of Jewish community involvement. While it is certainly the case that these uncontrollable factors have wielded considerable influence, it should not be lost on us that most American Jews were willing partners in this shift. As Charles Silberman noted in *A Certain People*, recently the first signs have appeared that some Jews are seeking a greater sense of belonging and believing. I believe that the personal satisfactions that flow from living in strong family and community far outweigh the costs. It would be a delightful irony if the value of personal fulfillment—a key in the dissolution of Jewish community—were now the source of its renewal.

Reshaping the way we think about the American Jewish family along the lines discussed by Martha Ackelsberg, Esther Ticktin, and Elliot Dorff, and providing more support for it through increased family education are critical to the family and to our blueprint for Jewish education. Such imagining and implementing of fresh visions typifies normative planning.

## The Relationship of American Jewry to Israel

The relationship of Israel and American Jewry suggests, again, the interconnectedness of issues and the need for fresh vision and planning. The role of Israel in the lives of American Jews is so strong that it is hard to imagine growing up as an American Jew today without it, a point made by Steven M. Cohen and Martin Raffel. The American Jew's relationship to Israel is the one part of the Jewish psyche that is regularly reinforced by the daily papers. Far more American Jews read about Israel every day than learn Talmud. The ethnic component of Jewish identity is intricately tied to what is happening in Israel. Pride in the Zionists' redeeming swamp and desert, in the achievements of the Israeli citizen-soldier, in the military victories of 1967 and 1973, and in the building of a sophisticated, contemporary Israeli culture has helped to shape the life of every American Jew. Similarly, American Jews have been profoundly influenced by their worry about the threat of further war in the Middle East, Israel's treatment of its Arab inhabitants, the problems between Orthodox and non-Orthodox and between Sephardim and Ashkenazim, and the host of other problems Israel faces.

While it is possible to describe the relationship of American Jewry to Israel as Judaism by proxy, I believe it is fairer to say that American Jews take with great seriousness the traditional idea that *kol Yisrael areivim zeh bazeh*, that every Jew is connected to all others and responsible for them. With the American Jew's sense of ethnic identity rooted deeply in the success and problems of Israel, the successes and failures of Israel have a substantial impact on American Jews.

Yet the cultural gap between Israelis and American Jewry is continuously growing. Israeli society does not have as strong a commitment to the civil liberties, religious freedom, and democratic processes that are so much a part of American Jewish life. Because Israelis constantly live with overwhelming problems of war and peace, they have been willing to compromise in areas that American Jews consider essential. And Israeli culture has taken on a life of its own, a life from which American Jews are separated not only by thousands of miles, but by a language barrier and radically different life experiences. The gap in experience is reflected in the issues of women's rights, Jewish pluralism, and separation between church and state. American Jews have discovered the gap in political cultures; the response to the intifada and problems associated with negotiating with the Palestinians have further strained the effort to maintain close ties.

The resulting alienation of American Jews from aspects of Israeli life has political, social, religious, and cultural dimensions. That in itself is worrisome, but when we think of Israel's role in American public life, the dimensions of that alienation could become considerably more complex and dangerous. The powerful involvement in Israel of the American Jewish federations is one example.

The tie to Israel is a critical factor in recruiting volunteers and raising money for domestic projects. Involvement with Israel is deeply embedded in the operations of such national organizations as the American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, Anti-Defamation League, AIPAC, and dozens of others; for many, Israel is the central focus of operations. Any shift in the relationship between American Jewry and Israel poses a major threat to the stability of many of the most important institutions in American Jewish life. At the least, some would have to undergo major policy revisions; at worst, some would find their very survival endangered and their service to the Jewish community severely constricted. Philip M. Klutznick explores some of these institutional issues in his essay.

Because Israel has taken on a major sacral dimension of its own, what happens in Israel also has a major impact on life in the synagogue. Israel symbolizes the post-Holocaust rebirth of Jewry; Yom Ha'atzmaut, Israel Independence Day, is now a major synagogue event and communal event. Observance of the holiday illustrates the powerful interaction of the religious and ethnic, personal and communal, synagogal and federation aspects of the American Jewish connection to Israel.

A deepened commitment to forging more and stronger relationships between individual Israelis and individual American Jews—the dialogue and empathy that come from personal relations—may hold a key place in reducing future difficulties. But the necessary relationships will be costly to build. Massive funding would be needed for American Jews—particularly younger ones—to spend enough time in Israel to build such relationships. And no less important is bringing Israelis who will return to Israel to America to spend a year or more living among Jews here.

These direct linkages can break down the global drift between Israelis and American Jews and can make political and ideological problems into personal ones. They can perhaps help to normalize the relationship. Such normalization will show us how the sacral, the ethnic, the moral, and the political form a seamless whole encompassing every Jew. Given the political and moral tensions in the current relationship between Israeli and American Jews, normalizing the relationship may well have a profound effect on the ability of American Jews to build strong and healthy communities here. And if the steps toward normalization represent the kind of watershed some of us imagine, the effects will be cultural, social, religious, ethnic, and even familial. Making this effort requires an enormous reorganization of Jewish communal funds. But if the present situation is as fraught with danger as it appears, and if the dream of a deep interpersonal connection between Israel and the Diaspora is as powerful as it seems to be, then planning the steps to get to this fresh vision should not be delayed. The strategic planning that dominates the Jewish community today would have to shift to a normative planning model. Making that transition poses an enormous challenge.

## Reconnecting Jews and Judaism

A third problem nexus is the need to win and maintain Jewish loyalty. The institutions that have proved most successful at helping Jews find their way to Judaism these days take many forms—Jewish camping and youth groups, missions to Israel, adult bat mitzvah, *ba'al teshuvah* yeshivahs, and young leadership groups, to name but a few. Private activities such as reading the torrent of new academic and popular Jewish books exist alongside large-scale cultural activities and more intimate *havurah* settings. Some of the challenges posed by forms of Jewish involvement are explored by Deborah Lipstadt, Everett Gendler, Hillel Levine, Rela Geffen Monson, and Deborah Dash Moore. No single method works so well that it can supersede the others. The necessity of many forms of involvement reflects the diversity of interests and commitments within contemporary American Jewry.

What does seem clear is that reaching out to the largest possible number of American Jews requires multiple tactics and seeing the Jewish community in its diversity. It must be considered in segments, with attention to the special needs, requirements, and interests of each. In this volume Lawrence Kushner, Burt Jacobson, and Lee Friedlander address one example of this approach—life-cycle needs in the synagogue setting. They show the complicated psychological situation of the family, the sensitive counseling the family requires, and the importance of ritual to fragile families. Life-cycle moments provide opportunities to reconnect families to the life of the Jewish community. Despite their obvious importance, endeavors to meet the needs of the family do not generally seem to receive the careful consideration they deserve.

As the emphasis in many families has shifted over three generations from daily to weekly to yearly to life-cycle Jewish observance, the opportunities for reconnecting the family to the community have become rarer. The religious, psychological, and communal significance of life-cycle events has deepened in the face of this reality. Significant life-cycle moments beg to be embodied in pivotal spiritual and communal events, around which much of the other Jewish activity in families' lives could be planned. The religious school is seen by many families as the place to go for preparing for bar or bat mitzvah. For the school to surmount the pressure for privatization, links must be built between the religious school population and other members of the synagogue. This broadening of the notion of education not only redefines the forces of Jewish acculturation, it reaffirms the commitment to community.

Young leadership groups that create opportunities for men and women to meet each other by involving themselves in Jewish organizational life are doing two important things. Sometimes they provide substantive opportunities for Jewish learning and for discovering other Jewish communal institutions to which their members can develop longer-term commitments. When that happens, young leadership groups, too, become major forces for Jewish connection. And often they provide exposure to a broad variety of Jewish arts and culture, helping

to acculturate their members and to provide an audience for the writers and performers who are helping to shape Jewish culture.

Groups focused primarily on social-justice activities can similarly provide an entry point for Jewish return. This is most likely when the group does not limit itself to involvement in a single narrow cause and when Jewish study within the group makes a connection between the group's activities and values and sources within the Jewish tradition. Such possibilities are suggested in the essays by Arthur Waskow and David Wortman. A shared social setting, moral action, and Jewish learning can combine to provide a transcendent sense of meaning and belonging.

What do these three settings—a young leadership group, a synagogue, and a social action group—have in common? They all illustrate that unless we act upon a vision of maximalist involvement, we are missing key opportunities for Judaization. Of course there are many Jews who would not be reached even if such a shared vision were widely implemented. And of course as pluralists we should not be judgmental toward those Jews who do not share our vision. But that maximalist vision turns each Jewish contact into an opportunity further to excite and involve in learning, action, spiritual deepening, and community. We squander the resources for building the Jewish future when we fail to formulate and act upon such a vision. One key to that vision is finding the words to express it. Arthur Green and Judith Plaskow in their essays describe the effort to create language that can link the theological to the moral and political.

Everyone who attended the conference sponsored by the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, at which the papers in this volume were delivered, was excited. Why? I know of several reasons. Some of the most exciting minds in the American Jewish community came together to talk about matters of deep concern. They were unconstrained by organizational agendas or demands for exacting scholarship. On the contrary, they were urged to dream, imagine, and paint vivid pictures. They were urged to state fully their disagreements with each other. The result was a conference filled with passion and freshness yet free from the acrimony that so often marks the need to defend institutional interests.

That conference and this volume represent one way to reach out to some of the best-trained scholars whose primary concerns revolve around the future of Jewry. Part of the challenge facing the RRC's planned Institute for the Jewish Future is to harness the ideas and energies of such people for the sake of the community and to bring their ideas and approaches to organizations that can apply them. It is still the case in the American Jewish community that the approaches of most of the large organizations are cautious and slow. The Institute for the Jewish Future posits that this is a time requiring dreaming, bold innovation, and experimentation. Stimulating such developments and supporting those organizations willing to undertake more innovation is part of the institute's mission. It can fulfill that mission only within the context of encouraging a pluralistic, experimental, and open-ended approach to the contemporary Jewish situ-

ation. Since that approach stands in contrast to a change-resistant, unity-seeking mode that operates by cautious consultation, it will not have universal appeal. But the risk-taking and change that are needed will show their value over time.

We need to encourage those capable of recommending fresh directions. History suggests that they will probably not be those closest to the problems, probably not practitioners invested in current conventions. We need to make more room for the academics who have greater latitude and perspective to express their views and try out new ideas. Aside from a handful of stars on the scholar-in-residence circuit, most of the scholars who have those insights do not attract the audience or support needed to justify their attention to practical solutions. And those deeply involved in speaking to Jewish organizations tend to tailor their message to what those organizations expect to hear. I believe that the Institute for the Jewish Future can provide the needed bridge between the Jewish community and the scholars less deeply involved with Jewish organizations, without demanding from either scholars or community the concessions that both have shown themselves unready to make. This is a critical part of creating the open marketplace of ideas and developing the tactical skills necessary to implement fresh visions.

Imagining the Jewish future is not just an armchair exercise. And it is not just a chance to voice optimism about the Jewish future. This imagining should lead to concrete action, strategic planning, and the redesign of programs along the gamut of Jewish organizations. This vision should inspire Jewish leaders—and through them Jews of all kinds—about what the future can bring if we start fulfilling our visions this very day. The essays that follow can shape our visions and move us toward action if we listen for their message. They illustrate an approach to Jewish life that is visionary and vigorous, rooted in pluralism, dialogue, and openness—an approach American Jews need in much greater abundance.

The fundamental issues raised in this volume are not significantly altered by such recent momentous events as the Gulf war, the coming of democracy to Eastern Europe, the massive immigration of Soviet Jews to Israel, and the disintegration of communism in the Soviet Union. The gap between Israeli and American Jews continues to grow; the National Jewish Population Study of 1990 shows increasing American Jewish assimilation; and the threat of nuclear proliferation in the Third World continues. The need to take a unified normative approach remains. The challenge for American Jews, as for any group involved in trying to bridge the gap between a dream and its realization, is to unite around fresh visions—to see the dream through to the light of day.