

# **At the Crossroads: Shaping Our Jewish Future**

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"DREAMING THE FUTURE OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY"

**Combined Jewish Philanthropies  
Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies**

1995

# *Dreaming the Future of the American Jewish Community*

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*"Dreams are not so different from Deeds as some may think. All the Deeds of men are only Dreams at first. And in the end, their Deeds dissolve into Dreams."*

—THEODOR HERZL, *ALTNEULAND* (1902)

Writing in 1964, the dean of American Jewish historians, Jacob R. Marcus, anticipated the future of the American Jewish community with boundless optimism. "A new Jew is...emerging here on American soil," he exulted. "Blending...Americanism and Judaism," this new Jew, he believed, would preside over "the birth of another Golden Age in Jewish life." "Barring a 'historical accident'," he wrote, "such a development is inevitable on this soil."

Three decades later, such optimistic predictions ring hollow to many American Jews. Instead, the literature of American Jewish life is suffused with pessimism. "In recent years," the National Jewish Population Survey found, "just over half of Born Jews who married. . . chose a spouse who was born a Gentile and has remained so." Without a spiritual revival, Arthur Hertzberg warns, "American Jewish history will soon end, and become a part of American memory as a whole."

Against this background, the Wilstein Institute's call for visionary leadership ("As you think about the American Jewish community of the future, describe the kind of community you would like to see") is particularly welcome. It reminds us that our future, far from being preordained, is waiting to be shaped. The question is not what the future will bring, but what we ourselves will bring to it.

The call to look to the future comes at a moment when the American Jewish community faces a crossroads in its history. At a time

of uncertainty, it yearns for a realizable dream, an inspiring mission that it can labor to fulfill. Zionism and courageous efforts to save Jews suffering abroad met this need for generations past, but today, with the emergence of a strong, politically independent Israel and the collapse of the Soviet Union, these long-cherished goals stand accomplished. The time has therefore come to dream a new dream, one that focuses on American Jewish life as we would like it to look in the twenty-first century.

For me, this dream flows directly from the American Jewish community's historic mission: to demonstrate that Judaism can succeed and flourish in a free, democratic and pluralistic diaspora environment. Where classical Zionism insisted that emancipation was a failure, anti-Semitism ubiquitous, assimilation inevitable, and that Jewish life could only truly thrive in the Land of Israel, American Jews responded, "America is different." In the United States, they argued, Jews could achieve what they never did elsewhere in the diaspora: be treated as equals, thrive economically, and at the same time maintain their distinctive identity.

The central question facing the American Jewish community today is whether Judaism can still survive in this atmosphere of unprecedented social and religious freedom. Behind the clamorous debate over "continuity" lurks the agonizing fear that perhaps the European Zionists were right all along; maybe America is not so different in the end. If so, however, Jewish life will not succeed anywhere outside of Israel. And that suggests the unthinkable: that Judaism cannot hold its own within a competitive, pluralistic religious environment.

Assuming, then, that the American Jewish community must survive, how do I envisage its future? I dream of an American Jewish community that successfully balances Americanism and Judaism, a community steeped in two cultures, committed to the ideals of each, and drawing sustenance from both. Such a community, at once traditional and modern, stubbornly resistant to extremists and assimilationists, and bound both to the precepts of Judaism and to the values of American life would, of necessity, periodically struggle with the conflicting demands of its dual heritage. That same heritage, however, would also prove its enduring glory. For in the final analysis, the mission of the American Jew is to make diaspora Judaism work. And that means succeeding in two worlds at once and ensuring that one's children do likewise.