Introduction to This Issue from the Guest Editors

Alan Henkin and Paul Kipnes

• In five years will online Jewish communities or webcasting by brick and mortar temples lead to a redefinition of what it means (and what it costs) to be a member?
• In ten years will we see serial mergers or wholesale closures of synagogues, even in large metropolitan areas?
• In thirty years will the Union for Reform Judaism or the Conservative Movement’s Jewish Theological Seminary exist as separate entities?
• In fifty years or more, will any of us recognize the entity we now call the “Jewish Community”?
• How can we—or should we—be responding to any of this?

At one time, we could leave it to the leaders—religious and secular—of the Jewish community to struggle with and respond to such questions. Yet right now, recession-focused economics, powerful technology, and eye-opening demographics are transforming virtually the entire landscape of American Jewry and American Judaism in ways that we are only beginning to acknowledge or address. Beyond the big picture and ideological challenges that arise, these changes are affecting our rabbinates and our own communities. We can no longer afford to let others address these issues for us.

This issue of the CCAR Journal explores the impact of these powerful forces, while grappling with the nature of religious Jewry, our synagogues and organizations, and our denominations thirty, fifty,

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and one hundred years from now. The thinkers who contributed to this issue run the gamut from recently ordained to veteran rabbis, from established scholars and pulpit rabbis to innovative online community rabbis, and they bring diverse perspectives to the evolving American-Jewish community that reflect their own positions in the Jewish community. Each writer examines the past and present to highlight unique aspects of the future. Read separately, the articles give us much food for thought. Taken together, this much becomes eminently clear: the community that we bequeath to those who come after us will be dramatically different from the community of today.

Economy, technology, and demography—recent changes in these three realms will long serve as the lens through which we view our past and present. Out of the mix emerge new visions of Jewish community.

Economy. The economic realities, brought to the fore by the recession, have created permanent changes in the way in which our institutions do business. The Jewish community of the future will have to find creative ways to fund itself. For one thing, discretionary dollars—for our congregants and in our funds—are few and far between now. What’s more, Jewish philanthropic funds are often filling the coffers of non-Jewish causes and institutions. Dues, once the primary funding mechanism of synagogues, are largely maxed out; synagogue and organization leaders are feverishly searching for new revenue streams. Given the experience of colleges and universities, the most likely candidate appears to be the endowment fund. We are already seeing dozens of communities embarking on capital campaigns to raise money for endowment funds in order to supplement dues. How else will declining dollars force us to rethink the way we shall dream dreams and envision the future?

Technology. Marry funding issues with opportunities and dangers posed by technology and unfamiliar challenges are born. As our communities become increasingly adept at using technology, the notion of membership will have to be reexamined. For example, if a synagogue streams its services, and those services are so fulfilling that the synagogue develops a following across the country or even the entire globe, then in what sense are those followers “members” of the synagogue? Will they only passively experience
the worship, or will they enjoy it so much that they will demand other avenues to take part in the community? Already some colleagues are setting up online synagogue communities to address these emerging interests. Our notion of membership is today premised on formal, filling-out-the-forms affiliation; in the future membership is likely to be gauged by participation both in person and at a distance.

Technology already has transformed the way in which synagogue members communicate with one another. E-mail is taken for granted; Twitter and Facebook are well established; and who knows what lies beyond the distant horizon. Collectively, we have been slow to adopt these new technologies and sometimes unsophisticated in our attempts to integrate them into our communal life. Nonetheless, synagogue web sites that until now have served as online congregational bulletins are slowly morphing into serious tools of Torah learning and community building. Technology gives us the option of highly individualized teaching, learning, and worship. Will we be able to convert that into a vision of Jewish community?

Demography. The demographics of the Jewish community are rapidly changing and appear irreversible. We are five or six generations past the Eastern European immigrant generation, and the Ashkenazic roots of most American Jews are a dim memory. We are also a shrinking community; our birthrate is not replacing our losses. We are a graying community. We are becoming more ethnically diverse as more Asians, African Americans, and Hispanics join our ranks by conversion, adoption, and marriage.

Moreover, the Millennial Generation, those eighteen- to thirty-year-olds whom everyone wants to reach, bears very different attitudes towards religion in general and Judaism in particular. They are experimental, individualistic, and often focused on (or motivated by) single issues such as social justice, the environment, or worship music. With a plethora of options before them and numerous new ideas awaiting a jumpstart by the creative few, they can afford to be choosy consumers. They bring to the Jewish community what Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen have called “the Sovereign Self,” the post-modern Jewish self in which personal meaning becomes the determinant for Jewish participation.1 In other words, for many young Jews involvement in Jewish communities
has nothing to do with family obligation, tribal loyalty, or affiliation history; instead, they will connect with Jewish organizations to the extent in which they find meaning, learning, and community. The Avi Chai foundation, in a just-published paper entitled, “Generation of Change: How Leaders in Their Twenties and Thirties Are Reshaping American Jewish Life,” notes that these leaders “declare their independence of once sacrosanct ways of thinking and organizing.”2 Accommodating young Jews with this sense of themselves will challenge all Jewish community institutions, especially synagogues. Are we up to it?

Not only will our synagogues be challenged, but the ideology and the institutions of Jewish denominationalism will undergo a makeover in the next generation or two. As Rabbi David Ellenson has written elsewhere, denominationalism is in many ways a creature of the immigrant generation, to which ideology and catch-all institution-building came naturally.3 Today the members of the Jewish denominations care little for the ideology of the movements beyond a few basic principles, even as they care greatly about the services provided by the denominations to their synagogues and their members. Thus the denominations and institutions that endure will be those that provide services (including but not limited to youth camps, youth organizations, and synagogue management expertise) along nonideological and even nondenominational bases. Our URJ and HUC-JIR, which arguably attempted to transform themselves even before the economy finally collapsed, are both struggling to reimagine themselves. Unable to sidestep the coming cataclysm, they made painful choices. Will they position themselves for the even more painful transformations demanded by this New World Order?

Furthermore, observers have long pointed out that American Jewry is moving towards a two-denomination system: the Orthodox and the liberal. No doubt, this trend will continue and even accelerate. We are already seeing increasing collaboration among the liberal denominations, and it is not hard to imagine how this collaboration may well lead someday to a merging of the denominational institutions of American Jews, especially as the denominations shed their ideological raison d’être.

And what of the rabbinate? As Jill Hudson has written in a recent issue of the Alban Institute’s Congregations, clergy in the twenty-first century will need these capacities:
To maintain personal, professional, and spiritual balance;
To develop and communicate a vision;
To interpret and lead change;
To manage conflict;
To navigate the world of technology;
And to be a life-long learner.¹

To her list we would add the capacity to design and lead compelling worship and to teach Torah in a way that enables people to find deep meaning in the post-modern era.

As we two Californians might describe it, the American Jewish community is standing on surfboards at the center of the turbulence, the waves are getting gnarly, and there have to be better options than just bailing out or wiping out. Rather than succumb to the inescapable brainfreeze that results when dunking our heads into these deep questions, we have asked the contributors to this issue to look beneath the surface and articulate visions of Jewish community with unblinking eyes.

We want to express our deepest gratitude to them for sharing their expertise so generously, for looking into their urim v’tumim so insightfully, and for writing their pieces so eloquently. We are also grateful to Rabbi Susan Laemmle, the CCAR Journal editor, for inviting us to edit this issue; to Rabbi Hara Person, the director of the CCAR Press, for her support and direction; and to our families and Jewish communities, for the sustenance we gain from them.

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