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Jewish Polity and American Civil
Society

*Communal Agencies and Religious
Movements in the American Public
Sphere*

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Jews and the American Public Square is a three-year project of communal dialogue, research, and publication devoted to exploring the relationship between the faith and culture of American Jews and their civic engagement. Initiated by a major grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the project seeks to foster greater understanding among both Jews and non-Jews of the role of religion in American public life.

Also available:

Jews and the American Public Square: Debating Religion and Republic, edited by Alan Mittleman, Jonathan D. Sarna, and Robert Licht (2002).

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Preface

Alan Mittleman

Recent American social and political thought has been much concerned with civil society. Civil society is the hard-to-define realm situated between the government and the marketplace. It straddles the public and the private. It is a sphere of associations, of voluntary groups and of primordial connections without which neither democratic life nor personal life can flourish.¹ As concern over the state of American democracy has grown, many theorists look to civil society as a source of democratic renewal. Two centuries ago Alexis de Tocqueville found that a rich network of voluntary associations animated American civil society. He thought that the American tradition of voluntary association could offset the powerful centrifugal forces of unrestrained individualism, a lurking danger for the American experiment. Communal associations could channel self-interest to serve public purposes. Ever since Tocqueville, the health of associational life and the vitality of democracy have been paired.

At the dawn of the new century, there are important reasons to worry about the health of American associational life. The debate has been focused by Harvard scholar Robert Putnam, whose controversial article (and subsequent book), *Bowling Alone*, charts a precipitous decline in membership of many of the organizations that organized civil society in the twentieth century. Groups such as the PTA, service clubs such as the Lions, Elks, Kiwanis, and Masons, bowling leagues and sport clubs, religious fraternal organizations such as Knights of Columbus, and women's groups such as the League of Women Voters have lost their centrality in civic life.