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Imagining the American Jewish Community

Edited by Jack Wertheimer

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Since their arrival on these shores over 350 years ago, American Jews who have wished to maintain a Jewish communal life have faced a set of novel challenges. In marked contrast to coreligionists living in Christian and Muslim lands still governed by medieval laws, Jews were free throughout their history in the United States to embrace or eschew communal involvement; to support or ignore Jewish institutions; to associate with other Jews or maintain a distance from them. In time, when the Constitution forbade governments from establishing a state religion, various arrangements of church/state separation further ensured that Jewish communal activities would be based entirely on voluntarism and not external state compulsion, the latter having served as an indispensable prop to Jewish communal organization throughout the medieval era and in most countries inhabited by Jews in modern times—but not in this country.

The dispersal of Jews across so vast a country has also posed serious challenges to Jewish unity. American Jews rarely established unifying national bodies—or if such agencies emerged, they rarely withstood for long periods of time the forces of regionalism and localism eroding their authority. Yet even on the local level, American Jews have struggled to maintain overarching communities. Jewish neighborhoods rarely lasted long, and as Jews decamped to green suburbs—and more recently, exurbs—their institutions found it hard to deliver services or maintain a sense of cohesion. For these and many other reasons, the group existence of Jews in the United States is a tale of efforts to create and re-create community in the face of powerful centrifugal pressures.

It is also a story of creativity and inventiveness. The Internet has spawned much talk about “virtual communities,” but in truth, Jews in diverse settings over many eras have formed virtual communities based not necessarily upon physical proximity, a common language, or even shared institutions but often upon less tangible commonalities—an identification with victims of antisemitic persecution, a shared concern for impoverished and homeless coreligionists, a desire to maintain vital religious, educational and cultural institutions, and overarching ideologies.

America’s voluntaristic ethos, moreover, provided opportunities for Jews to devise innovative communal arrangements. American society had never hosted Jewish communities in the Middle Ages, and, accordingly, no entrenched traditions governed *how* Jews should organize themselves. Rather, as wave upon wave of Jewish immigrants washed up on these shores, each new group reinvented its own communal institutions and patterns of association to fit its own and the then-prevailing American conception of community. In time, new forms of communal association emerged to address the concerns of men