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## AMERICAN ORTHODOXY:

### Some Guidelines for its Community Development and Organization

In the last decade, the Orthodox *community* has achieved unprecedented successes, which paradoxically, has engendered organizational problems, some threatening important facets of its institutional framework. This unique experience of communal expansion and fragmentation has generated a new set of problems for American Orthodoxy, requiring of it a more effective institutional apparatus, capable of responding to Orthodox communal needs with vision, initiative, imagination and flexibility. The paper will suggest guidelines for the development of Orthodox community organization.

The problem of community organization in the Orthodox community is best reflected in the problems confronting it in the cities — the spreading urban blight, massive population shifts in the cities, and the continuing evacuation and transformation of Jewish neighborhoods. This problem is not a new one. For the last two to three decades, the entire Jewish community has been exposed to the continuing erosion of Jewish urban communities. What has changed is the increased urgency of these problems for the Orthodox community, their ever rippling impact on Orthodox institutions, and the growing recognition of the staggering economic and communal cost of these changes to our already hard-pressed institutions. Most significantly, the Orthodox community appears ready to act to arrest these corrosive processes, but has not yet developed the communal machinery to effectively do so in a comprehensive and coordinated way.

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What has made the ecological and physical problems of the Orthodox Jewish communities more acute is that they are no longer confined to low income areas — what sociologists euphemistically called inner city areas. They have leapfrogged from slum to suburb, from the Jewish poor and near-poor to the Jewish middle class; the battlefield has shifted from Ocean Hill-Brownsville to Forest Hills and Flatbush. Furthermore, the problem now supercedes geography and the physical and demographic character of the Jewish community. Increasingly, the issue has become the growing displacement of the social, economic and political power of Jews and the Jewish community in the city. While these problems affect the entire Jewish community, because of the unique history and residential and occupational patterns of Orthodox Jews, they have had a much wider and more damaging impact on Orthodox ranks than on other segments of the Jewish community. Thus, one level of challenge confronting the present Orthodox community is insuring its physical stability and securing its social, political and economic interests.

The second level of challenge goes deeper than just insuring Orthodox communal viability, but actualizing and vitalizing its potential as a community. It is a remarkable paradox that simultaneous with the process of the physical displacement of the Orthodox community and its institutions, the Orthodox community in this country is entering an era of an extraordinary renaissance — a coming of age, with ever-increasing status and power. Indeed, Orthodoxy is on the threshold of becoming a “movement,” a powerful and I believe, redeeming moral and political impulse in American Jewish life that can transform the Jewish community in this country. While Orthodoxy’s catalytic role in general Jewish communal affairs has increased and its influence grown, it is far from being the powerful and pervasive force it can and should be in American Jewish life. This it can more fully achieve only by organizing all the component parts of the Orthodox community and orchestrating its strengths and strategies to become, in effect, a collective force, not solely a confederation of synagogues and *shtiblach*.

It is with these objectives in mind, maximal development and

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organization of American Orthodoxy as a community, with a viable and effective institutional apparatus, that this writer is making a series of recommendations for consideration by the Orthodox community and its leadership.

### I

There is a compelling need to raise the community consciousness in the Orthodox community, i.e., heightening and deepening its sense of community. All who know the Jewish community in this country are familiar with its multiple parties and ideologies and warring factions and personalities. This is doubly true of Orthodox life. But the realities of Orthodox collective communal existence are demanding that its common overriding interests and concerns unite it. This will even become clearer in the years ahead as a result of the powerful pressures that impinge upon American Orthodoxy in this society from the general and non-Orthodox Jewish community.

What Orthodoxy needs, therefore, is to begin identifying and highlighting the forces of convergence in its community, and minimizing and de-emphasizing the centrifugal patterns. Its various sub-groups do share an abundance of discreet interests and a number of common threats and dangers. It is around these that Orthodoxy can intensify and expand that sense of community consciousness which can be the harbinger of community solidarity, cooperation and ultimately, unity.

Let me cite two examples of recent Orthodox institutional convergence. The Jewish community of the lower East Side of New York City, the original area of Jewish settlement in New York, has a long history of fragmentation and division similar to those which plague Orthodox life in other geographic and institutional areas. When the development of a housing project threatened the very fragile population balance of that community, the entire Orthodox community put its differences aside and established a Jewish community council with broadly based, democratically selected representation from all synagogue and other local Jewish groups in the community. Once established, the initial scope of the organization was quickly broadened to

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include problems of the Jewish aged, the Jewish poor, and representation on the school, poverty and hospital boards. Recently, this group received a grant of \$75,000 from New York City and is presently a major force in that community's efforts to maintain its integrity and character as a Jewish community.

The second example concerns the plight of Soviet Jewry. Four national Orthodox groups belong to the national coordinating body on behalf of Soviet Jewry. However, most had not given this issue major priority in the early phases of this organization's work, nor was the Orthodox community ever a major voice in this body. In 1972, stimulated by key individuals, a caucus of the four groups was established to plan program and strategy and exert influence and pressure here and abroad on behalf of Soviet Jewry. Attention was initially focused on the religious needs of Soviet Jews in the USSR and in Israel, but the range of concerns was quickly broadened and many programs were initiated. While the coalition functioned, it demonstrated that for Orthodoxy, the communal whole is unquestionably greater than the sum of all its parts.

The common denominator in these examples was a shared concern, once identified, that was used to create a joint communal effort. The external problems in both instances were exceedingly complex, but were matched by the at least equally difficult problem of the mutual accommodation of Orthodox organizations, a long and painful process which was nonetheless accomplished in both cases and culminated in joint and productive communal undertakings. The same process, I contend, can be applied and extended to other Orthodox communal enterprises.

## II

The Orthodox community needs to identify its interests, formulate its positions on all issues affecting it, and argue its case persuasively in the board rooms of the Jewish establishment and within the general community. Orthodoxy is doing this with increasing skill and vigor. For too long, Orthodox interests were submerged, subordinated, or shamefully neglected by the lead-

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ership of the general Jewish community who acted as spokesman of the entire Jewish community. Where alleged Orthodox interests were articulated, they were too often expressed by self-anointed or appointed spokesmen who did not necessarily represent the interests of the community. Only with the emergence of the type of Orthodox community apparatus described further in this paper, is it likely that both these types of situations will be reduced, if not eliminated.

However, it is important that in the formulation of these Orthodox interests, they not be viewed in isolation, forcibly and artificially removed from the communal context in which they occur, nor pursued parochially as the Orthodox community is wont to do. Orthodoxy cannot be segregationist in perceiving or pursuing its objectives, because more frequently than it wishes to acknowledge, these interests are, or should be, intimately linked with either those of the Jewish or general community. Considering its tendency and inclination to respond unilaterally on the issues to which it does respond, the Orthodox community in systematically formulating its interests, needs — in my view — to identify the parameters of the convergence of its interests with that of the larger Jewish community and general society. To the extent that these interests converge, Orthodoxy's position should be defined not in terms of parochial Orthodox interests, but in terms of the larger interests of the Jewish and general community. Only to the degree that the interests diverge, should Orthodoxy's position be formulated specifically in Orthodox terms. This approach, requiring sophistication in community relations skills, adds great potency to Orthodoxy's communal posture because its demands cannot be defined or dismissed as Orthodox pleading. Instead, they become based on, and perceived as, Orthodoxy's wide-embracing range of communal concerns. Equally significant, it gives Orthodoxy access to new resources, not always readily available to it, for more productive solutions to some of its problems.

### III

Orthodox interests, however defined, cannot be effectively pur-

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sued unless the Orthodox community simultaneously works on behalf of the interests of the wider Jewish community and general society. Obtaining Federation support for day schools, for example, can be expedited and more effectively achieved if the Orthodox community is also involved in other aspects of the work of Federations. This is how influence is cultivated and exercised in any community. (I should add that aside from the strategic and political value of this approach, I believe Orthodox Jews have a moral obligation as Jews to be involved in every facet of Jewish communal life.) The same is true, of course, regarding the general community. Orthodox concerns in local neighborhoods are most effectively pursued when the Orthodox community also addresses itself to some of the larger, fundamental issues that are responsible for the transformation of communities — working, for example, for the creation of more middle-income housing in the central city, and appropriations for more effective police work, and all the services—health, social, educational—that preserve neighborhoods and prevent their deterioration.

Whenever Orthodox interests correspond with those of the larger Jewish and general communities, I would suggest that wherever possible, the Orthodox community establish working coalitions with them. Coalitions are an indispensable part of effective functioning in any political process. Where appropriate, morally and politically, Orthodoxy should do the same. As an example, let me cite a local Orthodox community council in New York, which created a “brotherhood” coalition with Puerto Rican community leaders in a successful effort to increase the allocation of the municipal and federal governments to the local poverty board. The coalition, a remarkable achievement in local Jewish community organization, was able to enlist top government officials as well as Jewish and Puerto Rican leaders of national stature to work on their behalf. Similar efforts were made borough-wide by representative organizations of the Jewish poor in one New York borough with counterpart ethnic communities. Another type of coalition still in the making involves Orthodox and non-Orthodox synagogue and rabbinic groups in conjunction with Jewish student groups to examine

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funding and allocation practices of Jewish federations around the United States. While the Orthodox community is specifically concerned with support for Orthodox day schools, other sectors of the Jewish community are equally concerned that Jewish funds be allocated for maximum use for Jewish purposes.

This concept of coalition has application not only in joint efforts with non-Orthodox groups, but with Orthodox groups as well. Wherever possible, such coalitions should be created. I have already briefly described the coalition of Orthodox Jewish organizations on behalf of Soviet Jewry, which needs to be reconstituted. Similarly, the ad-hoc conference of presidents of major Orthodox organizations. Such coalitions within the Orthodox community not only help achieve particular objectives; they also create a history of working together, building the sense and substance of community that I have been describing.

### IV

Orthodoxy has not yet created in this country a maximally effective community apparatus — locally, regionally or nationally. This task has yet to be accomplished by Orthodox rabbinical or synagogal groups. Yet, it is requisite in the decade ahead if Orthodoxy is to become an effective faith community within the context of American life, given the character of organized communal life, Jewish as well as non-Jewish, in the United States today.

The type of community organization being advocated here for Orthodoxy is essentially an instrument for giving tangible expression to the Orthodox community's shared sentiments as a group and helping secure its rights and attaining its objectives. Orthodoxy has succeeded in a spectacular way in building individual institutions, synagogues and schools. Unfortunately, it has been less effective in linking all the parts of its community — all its local and national institutions — together in concert. That metaphor should be underlined. Each of our institutions, like the members of a symphonic orchestra, have and should be assured of a separate independent role, but they need to play in harmony, complementing and supplementing one another.

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The question before us really is — if Orthodoxy has succeeded in developing an  $\text{\textcircled{U}}$  for kashrut, nationally recognized by all — the Orthodox right, left and center, as well as the non-Orthodox, why should it not be able to organize and develop counterpart Orthodox communal programs, national and local, for Soviet Jewry, for day schools, stabilizing Jewish neighborhoods, programs receiving the sanction and support of all the tribes of Orthodoxy?

Furthermore, Orthodoxy has also not yet embraced with sufficient ardor all the segments, some nascent, in Orthodox life. Its central concerns have vested leadership in the hands of a traditional elite — rabbis, affluent lay leaders, and, to its credit, in some instances, less affluent but committed *ba'aley batim*. But the Orthodox mansion in this country has many chambers and many splendid constituencies, and not all have been encouraged to maximally contribute their special gifts. I refer especially to young adults, the young marrieds between the ages of 25 and 40, academicians, professionals, and women. Orthodox community organization must embrace them all. Through their representatives or spokesmen on the national and local levels, each must be allowed to become integrated into the Orthodox community's policy planning and decision making, so that their unique perspectives and special capacities and skills can find expression in a truly representative Orthodox community. Each of these constituencies, in addition, should be encouraged to develop its own programs and activities, to do "their thing" as agents of the whole community and to reach their special audiences, which the traditional Orthodox elite cannot and have not yet accomplished.

### V

The budding Orthodox community apparatus, i.e., Orthodox community organization, national and local, must make room for and allow for diversity and pluralism. To extend the earlier musical analogy, each institutional player in the Orthodox community should be allowed to score and perform his own variations on the communal theme, provided, of course, it is done

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within the framework of the orchestra, the community, based on community, not individual, concerns. This pluralism is not a deviation from the rationally conceived community organization that I have been advocating, nor a concession to the reality, the cleavage and schisms in American Orthodoxy. This rich fabric of the Orthodox community is actually a great source of strength, provided it can harness the strengths inhering in its diversity in the pursuit of its multiple communal goals.

Orthodoxy has a large pool of competent, but unused and untrained lay leadership. It needs to identify, develop and involve this lay leadership, especially from the new constituencies. Equally important, in my view, is its desperate need for more and better-equipped professional leadership, not only to serve the Orthodox community and its needs, but also to serve and provide leadership within the wider Jewish community, to interpret and represent Orthodoxy there. I am not only referring to rabbis, educators and synagogue administrators, important as they are. There is an imperative need for a new breed of Orthodox community worker. That is where much of the action of Jewish life is moving, both in the Orthodox and general Jewish community, and that is where the future impact of Orthodoxy can be most significant.

Many Jewish lay leaders operate large businesses, have large professional practices, or work in large government or non-profit organizations. They recognize how crucial competent and creative management is to achieve their goals. If that is necessary to sell shoes or process insurance claims, such management is certainly imperative if the task is no less than *tikkun olam*, sanctifying Jewish life, hallowing the world and the society in which we live. Such a task requires passion and commitment, but also professionalism — skilled, sophisticated, trained community workers, administrators, and planners who can achieve all the objectives of the traditional community. This in turn, entails identifying gifted and talented young men and women of the Orthodox persuasion, encouraging them to pursue and become trained for such careers, and finding and creating opportunities for them in the Orthodox community and in the general Jewish community in federations and Jewish centers. These people will

truly be *shlichei tzibur*, the change agents of our community, to transform the American-Jewish community. More parochially, these professionals will help also accomplish the rationalization of the Orthodox community's accumulation and expenditure of resources.

The guidelines I have suggested appear deceptively simple in conception and execution. But they will require huge organizational effort and political skill to achieve and maintain them. Furthermore, many in the Orthodox community, for complex reasons, will resist them. But Orthodoxy has no choice but to move in this direction, whatever the difficulties and obstacles. The tide of Jewish history, in the writer's view, is running in the direction of the traditional Jewish community. Orthodoxy possesses the vision of authentic and genuine *Yahadut* for which young and sensitive Jews are yearning. But the Orthodox community must re-tool its communal apparatus if it is to survive the volcanic tremors that the Jewish community faces in the cities and if it is to respond to the challenge of this generation, and make Judaism not only accessible to, but an integral part of American Jewish life.

What this requires of American Orthodoxy most of all is an Orthodox *community*, in the most sublime sense of the word, with a shared sense of purpose, awareness of its communal interests, and finally, a community apparatus to achieve its collective purposes, broadly representative, professionally staffed, and led by an ever expanding base of committed lay and professional leaders. So inspired, so organized, Orthodoxy will become a movement — a powerful, pervasive, captivating force which can transform the Jewish community from a sociological entity to a religious community.

This Orthodoxy can accomplish. It is not a utopian dream, a never-never land. It is not a trans-oceanic phenomenon, possible only in the old country or in a re-constituted Zion. The vision is near, exceedingly near. All that remains is for us to accomplish it.