

Deja Vu: Energizing Jewish Life

This is a cautionary tale about the potential, and limits, of attempting to solve some of the key problems facing American Jewry — assimilation, lack of Jewish education, disinterest in religious and cultural life among young people — through increased funding, no matter how high the sums or how sincere the intentions.

My thoughts are prompted by Michael Steinhardt's bold proposal to help create, with the Jewish federation system, a Fund For Our Jewish Future, which would address the fact that in the philanthropist's words, Jewish literacy is "arguably at an all-time low" while "intermarriage rates remain at record levels."

Addressing the General Assembly of the United Jewish Communities in November, Steinhardt stirred the thousands of delegates in Jerusalem when he proposed a fund of at least \$100 million (to which he pledged to contribute \$10 million) for Jewish education as a means of invigorating "Jewish identity-formation" programs "from early childhood to day schools, camps and college programs." He called for a voucher project that would help provide early childhood Jewish education for every Jewish youngster in America, and more generally outlined a vision to spark Jewish leadership and creativity.

Sitting in the vast hall, listening to Steinhardt's inspiring words, I could not help but recall how an electrifying speech with a similar theme at a General Assembly 34 years earlier set in motion the creation of an ambitious program of the national federation system to address the very same issues. But The Institute For Jewish Life, which came into creation in the early 1970s amid great

excitement and calls for \$100 million to endow its efforts to "reshape our community Jewish life" through the "realm of identity, spirit" and innovative education, according to its initial task force report, was underfunded, limited in autonomy and a source of bitter controversy. The fact that the institute lasted less than five years and is hardly known or remembered even by veteran Jewish communal professionals is testimony to its status as a footnote in American Jewish life.

But let it be an instructive footnote, since how it came to be and why it failed to fulfill its goals speaks volumes about how our community functions and doesn't.

I was not at the 1969 G.A. in Boston, whose events set in motion the creation of the institute, but I was in Chicago in 1974 at my first G.A. when the decision was made about whether to extend or end its three-year tenure. For the life of me, I could not figure out why people I admired most in the community argued passionately for the demise of a project intended to revitalize Jewish life. But these were the activists and idealists who had seen the institute become a shadow of what it set out to be, and they wanted to put it out of its misery and end the sham, they said.

The institute closed in 1976, but its short life, begun with so much promise, and its quiet, bitter end, fascinated me. I spent months in 1980 writing a history of the project, interviewing and profiling many of the key players. The result, written for the Baltimore Jewish Times and called "The Life and Death of A Dream," came to more than

12,000 words. When I pulled the piece out of my files, dusted it off and re-read it after returning from Jerusalem last month, I found it disturbingly relevant.

Much has changed, of course, in our community and great strides have been made in re-prioritizing philanthropic goals. One notable trend is the ascendance of private foundations, like Steinhardt's, often setting rather than following communal agendas. But there is a striking resonance as well, such as the call — sparked by student protesters at the 1969 G.A. demanding inclusion and change — for at least \$100 million to revitalize Jewish education as a means of staving off assimilation.

To make a very long story short, the institute came into being in June 1972, but from the outset was hampered by problems of finances, lack of independence and unrealistically inflated expectations. In the almost three-year tug of war between the counterculture activists and Establishment leaders — the dreamers and the pragmatists — leading up to the institute's creation, a compromise of sorts had been reached. The institute was not autonomous or permanent, as originally planned. It was to be project oriented, not a think tank. And it was given a total budget of \$1.35 million, not \$100 million. During its brief tenure, the institute provided seed money for some creative projects, including \$4,500 to the editors of the Jewish Catalog, the highly influential do-it-yourself guide to Judaism, but the grand innovational programs were not to be.

Much of the problem was due to the "shtetlization" of communal life, with local federa-

tions unwilling to raise funds for national programs that might not have a direct impact on their own communities. Whether you call it practicality or provincialism, it was a major source of tension for the institute and continues to this day. The fact is that of Birthright Israel's three partners — the private funders (including Steinhardt), the federations and the State of Israel — only the funders have fulfilled their financial pledges in support of the innovative program providing free trips to Israel for 18- to 26-year-olds. That is proof that the local vs. national pressure remains a hindrance to accomplishing visionary goals.

There were many other issues involved in the failure of the institute, but as Steinhardt follows up on his challenge to the federations to join him in creating a mega-fund for the Jewish future, I urge him to recall the not-yet-distant Jewish past. As he well knows, the potential for partnership between major donors and federations is great, but the goals must be clear, and shared. Birthright Israel is a vivid example of both the best and worst of this collaboration, an innovative and bold program bogged down by snags in funding and the ideological tensions of shtetlization.

Our community still needs to think of research and development as a necessity rather than a luxury in revitalizing ourselves. Let's hope the successor to the Institute For Jewish Life has a longer and brighter run. □

To read the full text of the 1980 Baltimore Jewish Times article, click on www.thejewishweek.com/special-report/01-09-04/pdf

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'The Institute for Jewish Life lasted less than five years and is hardly remembered.'

