



21st-century trends: Reimagining the American Jewish experience

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In this brief outline, some twenty core themes are introduced designed to help frame how as communal and religious institutions leaders we will engage 21st-century American Jews. The data here is extracted from an array of population and attitudinal studies, conversations and observations and extrapolated information drawn from other religious and ethnic communities. Introduced through two lens, the first data set focuses on individual practice and behavior, while the second addresses organizational and operational responses.

From the Personal to the Communal: How Individuals See Themselves in Community

There is growing evidence of an entrepreneurial quality to 21st-century American Judaism, as we find more rabbis and other Jewish professionals making themselves available on a fee for service basis (i.e., rent-a-rabbi) Similarly, synagogues and communal institutions are exploring alternative income sources to underwrite their budgetary shortfalls.

We see a variety of personalized models of engagement with the continued evolution and development of on-line and boutique Jewish platforms of learning and organizing.

Where Israel remains a dividing line for America's Jews, the rise of antisemitism has generated a collective concern impacting Jews of all ages.

In recent survey studies, younger Jews are seen as outperforming older ones in connection with religious and cultural Jewish practices yet remain removed from many formal institutional connections.

The growing presence of Jews of color and the significantly high intermarriage rate are contributing to the increased diversity of America's Jews. Inclusion will be a major theme in connection with 21st-century Jewish organizing.

We also see a new wave of "libertarian" influence, especially among younger Jews, in terms of their patterns of participation, in being highly selective and cost-effective in the choices these individuals are making. The rise of the "Religious Nones" represents one such expression. This stream of independence is also evident by the significant numbers of younger Jewish voters registering as "independents".

Finally, there is evidence of younger Jews are living longer with their parents than earlier generations, while many young families and seniors, as a result of COVID, are on the move, relocating out of larger metropolitan areas to smaller communities as a lifestyle choice and for others, especially among older individuals, transporting themselves from blue states to purple and red states for tax and retirement purposes and benefits.

The changing nature and character of "work" in this society is impacting how Jews are recreating communal connections and reshaping the ways they participate.

Defining the 21st-Century American Jewish Experience: Implications for Communal and Religious Institutions

If core needs of our community defined Jewish organizing of the 19th-century, then innovation is driving 21st-century institutional behavior and practice.

If federations managed the communal agenda of the 20th-century, today, community and family foundations, as well as individual funders, are contributing to the reshaping 21st-century Jewish life, where established legacy entities appear to emulate smaller, focused start-ups.

If New York was seen as the “Jewish Capital City” and center of Jewish life in an earlier era, where ideas and practice moved from east to west; today innovation is unfolding everywhere on this continent, with many of the current demographic and organizational trends now moving in reverse, from west to east!

Jewish institutions of the 21st-century are described as “boutique,” where the focus has been on innovation and entrepreneurship. By contrast, 19th- and 20th-century “legacy” organizations can be viewed as formal, networked and corporate structures.

If 18th- and 19th-century American Judaism was constructed in order to help accommodate Jews to this new society and the roles that Jews would play, then 21st-century Judaism is being reshaped by such transformative forces as diversity, inclusion and individualism. Technology is revolutionizing how religious cultures are delivering their messages, services and programs.

If American capitalist ideas described and framed the behaviors of the historic Jewish organizations over the two earlier centuries, currently additional forms of economic activity, including collaborative engagement, entrepreneurial practice and alternative community organizing models, are in play.

Today, many of our organizations are saddled with a 19th-century legacy structure, while managing a 20th-century agenda, as we engage a 21st-century community.

If lay leadership drove the communal agenda in the 19th- and 20th-centuries, Jewish professionals, outside experts and corporate contractors are managing/directing the

21st-century Jewish infrastructure. The imprint of technology and economic data points are shaping the behavior of the Jewish marketplace. If the communal space was seen as a growth industry in the 20th-century, it is likely to be understood as being in a state of recalibration and downsizing at this time.

If Jewish political influence and philanthropic giving were centralized during the second half of the last century, where ADL led the fight against antisemitism, AIPAC managed the Israel political case, the Reform movement defined the liberal domestic agenda, AJC controlled inter-religious affairs and federations dominated the Israel giving field and Jewish social service marketplace, the 21st-century has exploded with the presence of an array of Jewish advocacy initiatives, multiple boutique giving choices and the presence of distinctive, highly-segmented organizing models, all now competing for communal space and a share of the Jewish market economy!

If in the 19th- and 20th-centuries we saw American Judaism as denominationally-based; in this century we can best describe religious behavior as personalized (privatized) where multiple “Judaisms” are in play providing varieties and multiple choices of expression and connection.

The pivotal shift from Institutional Judaism to “Privatized Judaisms.” This is contributing to the downsizing of the footprint of denominational Judaism and other forms of umbrella organizing.

The rise of “Virtual Judaism” will likely have a profound and lasting impact, as we see the emergence of national virtual congregations as well as the growing awareness of synagogues in continuing to serve their on-line members and religious seekers.

Where do we go from here? Trends are simply indicators of certain institutional and personal behaviors; they do not predict or define outcomes. The excitement here rests with the possibilities and opportunities to reimagine institutions, rethink the idea of community and to construct new avenues of personal connection. It speaks to the need for a new mindset regarding communal organizing principles, as we move from a competitive market environment to a space of collaborative engagement and as we reframe the organizing models that we will require moving forward.

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