



The New American Reality and What It Means for Jews

By Steven Windmueller, Ph.D.

As Jewish leaders gather in Chicago this week for the URJ Biennial, a new American story is emerging that will have profound implications for the Reform Movement and America's Jews collectively![1]

- *The demographic character of America is being recreated.*
- *The political culture of this society is experiencing new and significant stresses and threats.*
- *The American economic story is transitioning in significant and challenging ways.*
- *The role and place of religion in the United States is undergoing profound change.*

The New American Reality:

In seeking to identify what he describes as the “unwinding” of the American story, George Packer writes:

The large currents of the past generation – deindustrialisation, the flattening of average wages, the financialisation of the economy, income inequality, the growth of information technology, the flood of money into Washington, the rise of the political right – all had their origins in the late 70s. The US became more entrepreneurial and less bureaucratic, more individualistic and less communitarian, more free and less equal, more tolerant and less fair. Banking and technology, concentrated on the coasts, turned into engines of wealth, replacing the world of stuff with the world of bits, but without creating broad prosperity, while the heartland hollowed out. The institutions that had been the foundation of middle-class democracy, from public schools and secure jobs to flourishing newspapers and functioning legislatures, were set on the course of a long decline.[2]

Writing about this American transformation, Mark Dunkelman suggests:

Broadly understood, the developments of the past few decades have served to weaken the ties that once bound local communities together. In their place, we are, on one hand, now choosing to invest more time and energy in keeping in touch with our closest friends and family members, and, on the other, in trading bits of information with people we do not know very well but who share some single common interest. As a result, the relationships that stand between our most intimate friendships and our more distant acquaintances – the middle-tier

relationships that have long been at the root of American community life – have been left to wither.[3]

As this nation experiences these structural and behavioral shifts, what will all of this mean for America's Jews? Let us take a deeper look at a few of these trends:

1. Racial and Religious Hatred, along with Populist Nationalism, Are Changing America:

Religious prejudice and ethnic hatred have deep roots in American cultural history. Over the past century, extreme forms of nationalism have generated at different times various forms of political extremism, including expressions of anti-Semitism. Just as these particular forms of religious prejudice and excessive nationalism are being manifested on the political right, other expressions of political extremism are operating on the left. In this environment, anti-Israel messages and anti-Jewish sentiments are now seen as emergent themes. *How will we respond to both these old forms of religious prejudice and this new national political mindset?*

2. Religion in America is in a Deep Tailspin: As referenced in my earlier work, American religious life is undergoing a fundamental transition. A newly released Pew Study shows that *“four-in-ten U.S. adults ... lament what they perceive as religion’s declining influence on American society, while fewer than two-in-ten say they think religion is losing influence in American life and that this is a good thing.”*[4]

What is this emerging reality likely to mean for American Judaism? Despite the data that many Americans identify as “unchurched,” there is nonetheless a profound interest around spirituality and the search for “community.” *How might we envision Judaism contributing to these conversations around re-energizing the search for meaning and the re-emergence of communalism?*

3. America is Bereft of Any Authentic, Contemporary Political Ideology: Ideas drive the imagination, build culture, and shape institutions. Some might offer Donald Trump's populist nationalism as a new American political voice, in reality the ideas put forward by this Administration have their cultural roots in ideas formulated in the 19th century and expressed in the 20th century. *What ideas will energize and inspire the next generation of Americans?*

Democracy itself is being challenged across the world, and even in this nation. This represents a profound challenge to this nation's minorities, to the civic institutions essential to sustaining a robust society, and to those leaders who are seeking to preserve and defend the principles of law and democratic practices. *How do we best advance the ideas and promote institutions of a democratic society?*

4. The Great American Demographic Shift is Underway: Among the consequences that will change the religious equation in this country, Islam will replace Judaism as this nation's third major religious community (Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism).

Another aspect of the demographic shifts underway is reflected in a *Wall Street Journal* story: *"The U.S. is at the beginning of a tidal wave of homes hitting the market (21 million) on the scale of the housing bubble in the mid-2000s. This time it won't be driven by overbuilding, easy credit or irrational exuberance, but by an inevitable fact of life: the passing of the baby boomer generation."*

The demographic transitions within this nation are contributing to a multi-racial, multi-ethnic social order. Millennials and Gen Z are reshaping the cultural norms and social behaviors of 21st Century America. *What will be the new American paradigm, and what roles will Jews be playing in this new demographic alignment?*

5. The Fourth American Economic Revolution is at Hand: As technology, trade and consumer behavior drive the new economy, what will be the fall out over job losses, the rise of artificial intelligence, and the presence of a changing marketplace in reorienting the idea and practice of work and in the retooling of this nation's workforce?

6. The "Creative Edge" Has Dissipated: The "creative edge" that had once uniquely defined America appears no longer as evident and dominant. That intellectual resourceful spark that distinguished Americans within the arts, sciences and humanities seems diminished. *Has the emphasis and orientation of Americans shifted from innovation to preservation?*

Where once science and industry were the hallmarks of research investment and development, today the accumulation of financial resources is the new measure of entrepreneurship.

Correspondingly, in this new Gilded Age, are Jewish Americans modeling a similar pattern of accommodation to the existing order, no longer being seen as innovative pathfinders?[5]

7. The Character and Content of America is Changing: Are such basic ideas as pluralism and the celebration of core freedoms under assault?

American Jews believed that these principles were core to America's identity and offered a sense of security for its citizens. *What will be the impact of such changes on the American national character?*

8. The Communications Revolution is Altering our Relationships and Connections: How do we understand and operate in this new technology moment? A revolution is taking place that is reinventing both the forms of communication and the rewiring of our networks of engagement. *Our connections with other individuals, institutions and ideas are being reframed* in an age where texting, twitter accounts, and the cell phone have reoriented how we communicate.

In the process of changing the ways we engage, we have also changed the content of our relationships. *Truth*, once seen as a noun, fixed in place and sacred in meaning, has taken on the character of becoming an adjective. Facts are seen today as a relative proposition, subject to circumstance, convenience, and context.

9. Voluntarism: A Core American Value is in Free Fall. One of the measures that defined the uniqueness of this society has been voluntarism:

“Today, fewer Americans are volunteering their time and money on a regular basis. The national volunteer rate has not surpassed 28.8 percent since 2005, and *in 2015, it dipped to its lowest, at 24.9 percent.*”[6]

Volunteering has been seen as a distinctive American practice and with its decline, is our nation losing one of its core social attributes?

Jews emulated this concept of voluntary engagement in support of their communal and civic institutions. With life style changes and a changing economic environment, one can readily account for the undoing of this volunteer cultural model.

10. Demise of Community/Absence of Leadership: The demise of community and the weakening of institutional leadership both appear to be significant 21st Century trends. In a society marked by division, the *undermining of institutions* and the *unraveling of confidence in leadership* represent two major structural outcomes. Just as we see these trends present within the broader society, these patterns are evident within the Jewish community. The unraveling of communal systems and legacy institutions parallel what is happening in the broader society.

Assessing the American Jewish Future: Some Current Reflections

At this moment in time Judaism in America is in crisis. The trends introduced above are evident as well in the experiences of Jewish Americans. Elsewhere, I have written about a number of these factors and their impact on American Judaism. Four specific characteristics define the American Jewish scene:

- **The Demise of Jewish Peoplehood:** We can no longer identify ourselves as part of a *single community*, as we have become a *community of communities*. *Absent a shared consensus, Jews will experience a decline in political influence.*
- **A Leadership Crisis and an Ideological Vacuum:** In history Jews have been dependent upon their leaders to help frame the next great set of ideas. We are missing today such thought leaders who are able to shape a new American Jewish vision and agenda.

- **Anti-Semitism in America is Real, and It Must be Considered as Potentially Dangerous:** The expressions of hate in America are a reflection of the deep political divisions and cultural divides present within this society. Jews do not fare well in an environment of distrust where public institutions and civic leaders have lost the confidence of its citizens. In such a power vacuum, extremist ideas are given credence and destructive social behaviors are more readily likely to emerge.
- **The Changing Demographic Reality and the New American Religious Economy:** We are witnessing fewer engaged Jews and a growing disconnect between institutions and their potential audiences. The shifting priorities of donors and the availability of alternative giving options may lead to the reshaping of the Jewish communal order.

Seeds of Possibility:

Yet, within this collective vacuum, *there has emerged an extensive and exciting renaissance in Jewish boutique innovation.* Are we able to maximize these “on the edge” forms of religious, cultural, and ethnic expression? In some measure these alternative social models are seeking to supplement and in some areas replace the legacy structures of America’s Jewish engagement. What will all of these structural, economic and cultural changes mean for the American Jewish future?

In response to these mega challenges, will a new American Jewish scenario be created? Two core questions may well define the Jewish future. *What will be the impact of the new anti-Semitism on Jewish Americans?*

Secondly, *in an age of social unrest and at a time of institutional disengagement, are we likely to see a counter cultural response, the rebirth of religious engagement and spiritual investment on the part of Americans in general and Jews in particular?*

End Notes:

In this new American condition, as we have noted, the welfare and status of Jewish Americans is also changing. The changing roles and place of Jews within this culture are already underway. This new paradigm will alter perceptions about Jews, just as it is redefining our status and security within this nation. In response to these new realities, what storylines will American Jews seek to create that will define and shape our

21st Century journey?

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1 <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/in-this-season-of-our-liberation-american-jews-confront-themselves/> and

2 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/19/decline-fall-american-society-unravelling>

3 <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-transformation-of-american-community>

4 <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/11/15/americans-have-positive-views-about-religions-role-in-society-but-want-it-out-of-politics/>

5 <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/the-new-american-jewish-gilded-age-examining-wealth-anti-semitism-and-more/>

6 <https://www.citylab.com/life/2019/09/volunteer-opportunities-charitable-giving-national-service/597856/>

<https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/the-new-american-reality-and-what-it-means-for-jews/>