

Dynamics of Continuity and Change in Jewish Religious Life



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Dynamics of Continuity and Change in Jewish Religious Life

Simcha Fishbane and
Eric Levine

with Alan Kadish, Benjamin Brown,
Calvin Goldscheider, Nissan Rubin,
Judith Bleich, Zvi Jonathan Kaplan,
Pnina Mor, and Chaya Greenberger

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Dedicated by Simcha Fishbane to:

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Dedicated by Eric Levine to:

Tamar Levine

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of Life: Rites of Burial and Mourning in the Talmud and Midrash (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuchad, 1988), *The Joy of Life: Rites of Betrothal and Marriage in the Talmud and Midrash* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuchad, 2004), *Time and Life Cycle in Talmud and Midrash* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2008), and *New Rituals, Old Societies* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009). He has published numerous papers on rites and rites of passage in contemporary Israeli society and studies applying social scientific methods to the understanding of Late Antiquity Judaism.

Preface and Acknowledgments

While the oft-quoted saying *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* or “the more it changes, the more it’s the same thing” seems to aptly describe the nature of social life, the reverse may also be equally accurate: the more things stay the same, the more they change. Indeed, the recognized institutions of human society, of which religion is a primary example, are both sources of stability and continuity as well as innovation, controversy, and conflict.

This book presents a group of distinguished scholars from the fields of sociology, history, medicine, religion, and Jewish studies. The authors examine key cases and themes in religious life, emphasizing the continuities and discontinuities of tradition and its confrontation with trends pressing for transformation. Their essays revolve around the intersections and dynamics of Jewish religious continuity and change, forces that operate simultaneously, at times mutually reinforcing and at times in opposition to one another.

The research in this volume demonstrates the importance of rich, detailed case studies and historical, ideological, and philosophical surveys in order to understand the practical actions of individual and organizational or communal actors attempting to create, maintain, evolve, or disrupt religious life and institutions. The themes and cases explored in this volume cut across geographical boundaries and time frames. Furthermore, these studies have the potential to promote and positively affect thoughtful discussions in many quarters. They seek to generate greater understanding and dialogue among those who study Jewish life or who work in Jewish organizations, as well as those who live and function in religious communities. Indeed, the book brings forth sophisticated presentations and interpretations of Jewish law, religious texts, communities, and institutions. The contributors insightfully investigate the interplay of internal and external social and ideological forces, of the impact of organizations, and of the potential for individuals and groups to shape their religious environments.

Briefly, the opening chapter of the book by Eric Levine also serves as the overall introduction; the volume is then divided into three segments. Part I presents sociologically and anthropologically oriented analyses of contemporary and historical themes. In the opening chapter, Eric Levine employs organizational and social movement theories to discuss the role of religious organizations as platforms for either promoting or fending off innovation and change. He studies two recent examples of religious change movements, one of which is currently quite active. Simcha Fishbane analyzes the halakhic treatment of the concept of the *bat mitzvah* ceremony. He compares and contrasts the leading *piskei halakha* in his timely examination of an evolving but potentially controversial “ritual” innovation. The essay offered by Calvin Goldscheider provides a very important macro-level view of Jewish life in light of massive technological, social, political, and demographic forces at play. He traces these global trends and their significant effects on the Jewish community, its vitality, and future prospects.

Part II presents historical case studies of Jewish communities and their leaders debating religious change and the accommodation with outside society. Benjamin Brown examines the challenges to faith and theological and ideological responses in nineteenth-century ultra-Orthodox communities. He traces the continuities and discontinuities operative in different kinds of faith commitments. Judith Bleich studies fascinating debates around Christian and governmental influences on Jewish clerical customs and styles of dress in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe. Zvi Jonathan Kaplan reviews a failed attempt in France to change halakhic treatment of “chained” wives. It is an insightful and sobering look back at an endeavor in halakhic innovation. To close the section, Nissan Rubin provides an excursus into evolving religious mourning practices, drawing from extensive rabbinic sources. But even more—by associating such practices as marriage, *halitzah*, *yibum*, and inheritance—he also sheds light on the changing rabbinic view of family, community, relationships, and interpersonal obligations.

Finally, Part III looks at halakhic and ethical issues emerging as a consequence of modern scientific advances, medical technology, and treatment. Alan Kadish provides a sweeping overview of evolving halakhic approaches to medicine and scientific discovery as well as a penetrating analysis of the consistencies and inconsistencies in how various communities address these challenges. The research of Mor and Greenberger explores the potential ethical and halakhic implications of caring for those afflicted with extreme illness. They make an important contribution by offering conceptual and practical expansions of the framework for resolving cases of *pikuach nefesh*.

In sum, these essays examine critically important issues for all those concerned with understanding and leading Jewish communities and organizations today. The contributors demonstrate the complexities, contradictions, and nuances around the dynamics of Jewish religious continuity and change. Indeed, their chapters show how the Jewish tradition navigates between promoting continuity and stability and responding to or even embracing transformations in philosophy, ideology, ritual, law, and institutions. This volume offers rich research with both historical and contemporary relevance and interest. The collection has meaning and value as an academic contribution for teaching and research purposes, and potentially as a guide for organizational leaders and communal members. Typically, these discussions have remained limited to the halls of academia. Our hope is that this work will help lead to a more compelling application of research and ideas into non-academic circles and Jewish religious and communal life.

The editors, Simcha Fishbane and Eric Levine, would like to thank Dr. Alan Kadish, President and CEO of the Touro College and University System, for his support of this project; Dr. Michael Shmidman, coeditor of the Touro College Press, for his wisdom and guidance; and the gifted authors who contributed their scholarship in order to make this volume a reality. Many thanks as well are extended to the talented and devoted team at Academic Studies Press, including Alessandra Anzani, Acquisitions Editor, Eileen Wolfberg, Editorial Coordinator, and Sara Libby Robinson, copy editor. Of course, we extend our gratitude to Kira Nemirovsky, Production Editor, and Dr. Igor Nemirovsky, Director and Publisher.

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Simcha Fishbane

I would like to thank my wife, Joanne Fishbane, for her support and assistance in all of my scholarly projects. I also wish to dedicate this book to my friend, co-editor, and colleague Eric Levine. In addition, I want to thank Dr. Lynn Visson for her ceaseless support, advice, input, and editorial assistance. Dr. Visson, without hesitation or consideration of time, is always available to discuss my theories and review my work. Her contribution has been and is a basic essential factor in my scholarly work.

Eric Levine

I would like to express thanks to Dr. Steven Huberman, Dean of the Touro College Graduate School of Social Work for his support and leadership and to the entire Graduate School of Social Work family for providing a nurturing, inspiring, and exciting academic home.

I also want to express a special note of recognition to two instrumental figures who deeply influenced my professional and intellectual development. The first is Dr. Louis Levitt, my former graduate school professor and Director of the Doctoral Program at the Wurzweiler School of Social Work of Yeshiva University. Rabbi Irving “Yitz” Greenberg was my undergraduate professor and advisor and later professional colleague. In large measure, any professional or academic achievement of mine ultimately derives from their inspiration. The well-known compendium of Jewish ethical teachings, *Pirkei Avot*, or *Chapters of the Fathers*, posits important principles of learning: that a person should sit in the dust at the feet of sages, drink thirstily of their words, and acquire for oneself a teacher and mentor. Lou and Yitz have my eternal respect, gratitude, and affection for being my teachers, role models, colleagues, allies, advocates, and comrades in arms.

Finally, and most important, I am dedicating this book to Tamar Levine, my daughter. My earlier publications have been dedicated to my life’s partner, Roxanne Huberman Levine. Every day, our daughter uplifts our family and brings us tremendous pride, joy, and love. She is a blessing and a treasure and we are eternally grateful and fortunate.

Movements, Institutions and Organizations: Mobilizing for Religious Change

ERIC LEVINE

INTRODUCTION

Humor often serves to caricature human experience and plays off of some of the more laughable aspects of behavior. Cultural and ethnic humor, in particular, frequently functions that way as well. For example, Jews smile at the oft-repeated line that where there are two Jews, there are at least three opinions. Or the well-known joke about the Jew marooned on a desolate, uninhabited Pacific island. When finally rescued, the cast-away escorts his rescuers around the island and excitedly shows off how he survived alone for many years. He proudly exhibits two structures he has built—two synagogues—the one he will and the one he won't attend. However silly, the joke points to something very real in Jewish life: Jews debate, Jews disagree, Jews create institutions, and then often break away from them to form new ones.

The North American Jewish community has had a penchant for creating organizations. Many have been created anew and numerous synagogues and other organizations are the result of breakaways or mergers. And for good reason—organizations are critical vehicles for pursuing collective and shared meaning, needs and purposes. They are carriers of tradition, platforms for maintaining social stability and continuity, while at the same time providing the frameworks for change. Organizations are powerful forms of collective enterprise, serving as essential vehicles for social life at all levels of human endeavor.

Ironically, despite the impact that organizations have had and continue to make on Jewish life, there has been infrequent analysis of the formal Jewish organizational structure. There have been important scholars in the field of Jewish organizational analysis, notably Elazar, Windmueller, and Burstein, but this is largely an untapped or inconsistently researched field. This chapter benefits from their work in understanding the role and importance of organizations in the Jewish community, with particular interest in Jewish religious organizations. Therefore, this chapter has a series of objectives. The first is to explore the centrality and nature of organizations in American Jewish life. The discussion, of necessity, will examine the shifting landscape of the Jewish organizational scene. The second objective is to explore how organizations serve as platforms for promoting or resisting change, particularly regarding religious innovation. To approach this goal, we will review two contemporary examples of Jewish religious movements responding to the demands for religious change: the Union for Traditional Judaism (originally the Union for Traditional Conservative Judaism) and the emerging organizational network of “Open Orthodoxy.” We often think of religious change in terms of legal discourse, rabbinic pronouncements, policy positions, or ritual evolution. These cases help to demonstrate that movements seeking religious change, in opposition to their parent systems or organizations, often split off and create new organizations and networks of organizations to pursue their agendas and to build constituencies. Moreover, the contention here is that the Jewish religious organizations in question tended to mimic the form, function, and structure of other religious organizations and systems in the community, especially the groups they broke from, thus lending credence to the notion of isomorphism in organizational behavior. Finally, this essay will examine the organizational forms and repertoires adopted by contemporary change efforts and how isomorphic pressures limited the range of options in structure and activity that these organizations employed. The discussion will also lend support to what various observers have termed the realignment of the American Orthodox Jewish community. In the view of this writer and others, religious schism in Orthodoxy is in the offing.

The chapter draws upon two important theoretical frameworks: social movement theory and organization theory. The complementary nature of the two fields has been observed by a number of scholars, as has been the mutual borrowing and sharing of concepts, tools, and methods.¹ This essay continues

1 Sarah A. Soule, “Bringing Organizational Studies Back into Social Movement Scholarship,”

this writer's ongoing research interests in studying organizations, community, and collective action, as well as religious and social movements, especially in the Jewish experience. In particular, it draws upon the theoretical approach of institutionalism in organizational theory. The present study is important in at least two ways. As a member, professional, and student of the Jewish community, these issues are of intense personal and academic concern. As will shortly be discussed at greater length, from a communal standpoint, the theory and cases discussed are instructive in ways that can help us understand and respond to the continuing shifts occurring in the Jewish community overall and in the religious sector.

Organizations and Collective Action

In American society today, social and communal life has been, for the most part, synonymous with organizational life. Organizations come into being as people identify and seek solutions to their common interests or problems. Organizations provide the framework for regular, sustained contact among people. To have sustaining power beyond the mere coincidental, people need vehicles that can provide structure, regularity, stability, security, continuity, and shape to social life. The benefits of organizing formal groups are evident; groups that desire impact and longevity need to create structure and establish leadership, policy, and protocols.² Furthermore, people generally gravitate toward others who are like-minded, who share similar values, attitudes, and lifestyles. Even in the digital age dominated by social media, organizations remain as powerful vehicles for organizing social life, whether virtual or in person, ongoing or short term, conventional or unconventional.

A great deal of what people wish to accomplish cannot be achieved alone, either by private, individual action or through markets and the modern instrument for aggregating private interest, the corporation. Only through some form of *collective action* can people realize important individual and group goals and produce the myriad shared benefits associated with social life ... Collective action can involve advocating for causes or goals, recruiting others, and banding together to gain

in *The Future of Social Movement Research: Dynamics, Mechanisms and Processes*, eds. Jacqueliën van Stekelenburg, Conny Roggeband and Bert Klandermans (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 107 and 116.

2 Jo Freeman, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," accessed May 8, 2017, www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm.

voice and representation before public institutions, corporations, and other bodies, or it can entail producing something of value that is shared beyond those who created it. Whether the goal is the creation of public parks or pathways, health care or human rights, environmental sustainability or electoral accountability, or information databases and communications systems, the need for at least two people to act together toward the establishment of some shared “public good” is an enduring fact of human life.³

The banding together of people to accomplish shared goals denotes collective action and encompasses a wide array of human endeavor, “from raising an army to raising a barn; from building a bridge across a gulf separating states to building a faith community that spans the gulf between races; from organizing a business cartel to organizing a small partnership to compete in a crowded market; from the food riots of revolutionary France to the progressive dinners of charitable New York.”⁴ In other words, collective action is any and all activity aimed at producing a collective good: that is, “actions taken by two or more people in pursuit of the same collective good.”⁵

Examples abound of collective action and organizational activity.

Football teams engage in collective action, but so do churches, voluntary associations, and neighbors who clear weeds from a vacant lot. When you go to school or to work for a big company, you enter an organization that is carrying on collective action. But most of the collective action involved occurs with no significant contention and no government involvement. The bulk of collective action takes place outside contentious politics.⁶

Even in the realm of unconventional politics, social movements rely on and are composed of, in part, formal organizations.⁷ They are springboards for

3 Bruce Bimber, Andrew J. Flanagin, and Cynthia Stohl, *Collective Action in Organizations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1.

4 Gerald Marwell and Pamela Oliver, *The Critical Mass in Collective Action* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1–2.

5 *Ibid.*, 4.

6 Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2007), 5.

7 Beth Schaefer Caniglia and JoAnn Carmin, “Scholarship on Social Movement Organizations: Classic Views and Emerging Trends,” *Mobilization*, 10, no. 2 (2005): 202.

mobilization, incubators of talent, and collectors and disseminators of critical information.⁸ In other words, “the more organization, the better the prospects for mobilization and success.”⁹

The scholarly literature attests to the central, dominant, and powerful influence of organizations in contemporary society. Presthus asserts that “Contemporary organizations have a pervasive influence upon individual and group behavior, expressed through a web of rewards, sanctions, and other inducements that range from patent coercion to the most subtle of group appeals to conformity.”¹⁰ He goes as far as to work from the assumption that values and institutions mold personality and behavior. Organizational influences significantly change the conditions under which people make choices and behave. They impose socialization and act as miniature social systems in which the mechanics and consequences of socialization are defined, inculcating ideals, attitudes, and behavior, often merely to enhance the organization’s competitive chances.¹¹ Crozier adds that

We are all aware of the importance which large organizations have assumed, and will increasingly assume, in modern society. Most of us are employed, more or less directly, by large organizations; most of the goods we consume are mass produced by these same organizations. Our leisure and even our cultural life are dominated by other large organizations: the cities in which we reside are themselves large organizations whose complexity is beyond our understanding. In order to exercise effectively our rights of dissent and representation we must employ, at least in part, the large organization—a mode of action essential to modern man.¹²

Corwin also captures the essence of the organizational phenomenon.

Organizations have furthermore assumed a predominant role in contemporary life. Society takes concrete form through organizations that carry out its major functions. As a society evolves, organizations increase

8 Ibid., 204.

9 Elisabeth S. Clemens and Debra C. Minkoff, “Beyond the Iron Law: Rethinking the Place of Organizations in Social Movement Research,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, eds. David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2007), 155.

10 Robert Presthus, *The Organizational Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 3.

11 Ibid., 7.

12 Michel Crozier, *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 1.

in number, scale, and formality, and become important sources of power penetrating all sectors of life. Modern society has come to rely heavily on collective action. It follows in a very real sense that the main constituent members of society are not individuals, but organizations.¹³

So it is quite clear that we live today in an organizational world. It is only in modern life that the organization has become the dominant characteristic of society, appearing in large numbers and performing nearly every task a society needs in order to function.¹⁴ And while they display common or generic features they also exhibit staggering variety in size, structure, and operating processes.¹⁵ Scott and Davis offer a three-part definition. Organizations are:

- Collectivities oriented to the pursuit of relatively specific goals and exhibiting relatively highly formalized social structures.¹⁶
- Collectivities whose participants are pursuing multiple interests, both disparate and common, but who recognize the value of perpetuating the organization as an important resource.¹⁷
- Congeries of interdependent flows and activities linking shifting coalitions of participants embedded in wider material-resource and institutional environments.¹⁸

Bottom line, over and above any definitions, descriptions, lofty goals, or mission statements, organizations have the primary goal of survival and self-perpetuation.¹⁹

While nonprofit groups represent only one part of the American organizational scene, a brief examination of this ever-important and growing sector helps to amplify the point about the dominance of organizations in contemporary life. From 2003 to 2013, the number of nonprofit organizations registered with the U.S. Internal Revenue Service (IRS) rose from 1.38 million

13 Ronald G. Corwin, *The Organization-Society Nexus* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987), 3–4.

14 W. Richard Scott and Gerald F. Davis, *Organizations and Organizing: Rational, Natural, and Open System Perspectives* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc., 2007), 2.

15 *Ibid.*, 1.

16 *Ibid.*, 29.

17 *Ibid.*, 30.

18 *Ibid.*, 32.

19 Jeffrey Pfeffer, *New Directions for Organization Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 8–9.

to 1.41 million, an increase of 2.8 percent. These 1.41 million organizations comprise a diverse range of nonprofits, including art, health, education and advocacy nonprofits, labor unions, and business and professional associations. This broad spectrum, however, only includes registered nonprofit organizations; the total number of nonprofit organizations operating in the United States is unknown. Religious congregations and organizations with less than \$50,000 in annual revenue are not required to register with the IRS, though many do.²⁰ These unregistered organizations expand the scope of the nonprofit sector beyond the 1.41 million organizations. The nonprofit sector contributed an estimated \$905.9 billion to the US economy in 2013, comprising 5.4 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP).²¹ The National Center for Charitable Statistics—Nonprofit Almanac 2012 comes to a different estimation, calculating that there were 2.3 million nonprofits, of which nearly 1.6 million (rounded up) registered with the IRS as of 2012. That amounted to one nonprofit organization for every 175 Americans.²² The 1,571,056 tax-exempt organizations include 1,097,689 public charities, 105,030 private foundations, and 368,337 other types of nonprofit organizations, including chambers of commerce, fraternal organizations, and civic leagues. The case, then, of the dominance of organizations is supported even by the limited survey of the not-for-profit world. Once we consider the addition of other sectors, such as business, the picture is substantiated even further.

Of course, the numbers by themselves do not fully make the argument, for an understanding of the ramifications of all of the organizations and organizing activity is essential to the story. Toward that end, we turn to the work of a few well-known scholars. I have always been fascinated by the work of Robert Dahl, a major figure in political science, democratic theory, and organizational

20 The standard source for estimates of religious congregations is American Church Lists, a company that provides marketing data using phone listings and other sources. The most recent estimates from American Church Lists suggest there are about 345,000 houses of worship in the United States. Of these, approximately 235,000 are registered with the IRS, according to the analysis by the National Center for Charitable Statistics' of the July 2015 IRS Business Master File. See "Church Specialty List," InfoUSA. Accessed May 9, 2017, <http://www.infousa.com/church-list>.

21 See the online report, *The Nonprofit Sector in Brief 2015: Public Charities, Giving, and Volunteering*, authored by Brice McKeever, accessed May 9, 2017, <http://www.urban.org/research/publication/nonprofit-sector-brief-2015-public-charities-giving-and-volunteering>.

22 See the online page *Quick Facts about Nonprofits*, National Center for Charitable Statistics, accessed May 9, 2017, <http://www.nccs.urban.org/statistics/quickfacts.cfm>.

analysis. In his view, the phenomenon of organizational proliferation is uniquely a feature of modern democracy. Modern democratic nations extend to their citizens a general freedom to form and join independent organizations, whether they be religious, cultural, intellectual, labor, agricultural, commercial, or professional.²³ The motivation to organize intensifies as people become aware of the advantages to be gained from cooperation and the pooling of resources. Because it appears that an intrinsic feature of modern life in democracies is a highly developed sense of the advantages of organizing, organizations are thus bound to proliferate. Where citizens can more or less freely express and advocate their interests, and can afford to do so, and where organizations can be more or less freely formed, activists form and join organizations in order to advance their interests.²⁴ Such freedom permits—even strongly encourages—the formation of organizations. In a democratic setting, he asserts, the growth of independent organizations is both inevitable and desirable, a consequence of democracy, and necessary to its future.²⁵ As a result, North American society in general is marked by the existence of a plurality of relatively autonomous, independent organizations.²⁶

Dahl devoted much of his research to examining the contradictions of democratic pluralism, universal problems for any modern democracy. His analysis seems especially pertinent to this study. The powerful urge to organize in democratic countries is not without its drawbacks. The complexity of organizational life increases with an increase in the variety and number of relatively independent organizations. The complexity of this matrix of large and increasing numbers of groups has outstripped theory, existing information, and the capacity of the total system to be comprehended and meaningfully managed.²⁷ As more and more groups develop, of necessity competition for all manner of resources increases, including influence over decisions. The nature of democratic pluralism tends toward a decentralization of decision-making and policy setting, or at least a major role for independent groups in these processes. But, with a broadening and diversifying of organizational expression, the process of decision-making and consensus building becomes extremely complicated, even breaking down, with obvious repercussions for the perpetuation of the

23 Robert A. Dahl, *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 38.

24 *Ibid.*, 43.

25 *Ibid.*, 1.

26 *Ibid.*, 5.

27 *Ibid.*, 52.

system. In response, efforts are typically made to centralize power again, which contradicts the notion of the participation of the many in decisions and policies. Ironically, the expansion in the numbers of groups and interests, while a positive manifestation of freedom, nonetheless tends to create disharmony among interests, undermining the fragile bonds of commitment to the larger social system beyond the interest group.

In sum, Dahl describes mutually contradictory and conflictual processes in American life: organizational proliferation; a clogging of the system due to increased numbers; competition for resources and struggles for power, influence, and dominance; a decline in the ability of the system to create consensus; a decline in civic loyalty; and pressures toward “recentralization” to simplify decision-making processes. Moreover, this picture depicting the inherent contradictions of organizational life in modern democratic settings is further complicated by the observations of two leading social scientists, Ralf Dahrendorf and S. N. Eisenstadt.

Dahrendorf wrote that every society is a relatively persisting and well-integrated configuration of elements. Every element contributes to the society’s functioning, and every society rests on the consensus of its members.²⁸ Yet, conversely, every society is simultaneously subjected at every moment to stress and ubiquitous social change. Every society also experiences at every moment social conflict, conflict also being pervasive. Every element in a society contributes to its change and every society rests on the constraint of some of its members by other members.²⁹ Therefore, each society is simultaneously characterized by forces toward stability and change, integration and conflict, function and dysfunction, consensus and constraint, and all are valid aspects of each society.³⁰ Eisenstadt is largely in agreement. He asserts that conflict is both inherent and persistent in any setting of social interaction due to the plurality of players and with the institutionalization of rules and principles. And, he argues, there is always an element of latent dissension about the distribution of power and values in any social order. Thus, “anti-systems” can erupt that contain the potential for social change in any society.³¹

28 Ralf Dahrendorf, “Toward a Theory of Social Conflict,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 2 (June 1958), 174.

29 Ibid., 174.

30 Ibid., 176.

31 S. N. Eisenstadt, “A Reappraisal of Theories of Social Change,” in *Social Change and Modernity*, eds. Hans Haferkamp and Neil J. Smelser (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 216–17.

These renowned social scientists did not direct their analyses specifically to any one subnetwork or subset of institutions in American life. Likewise, their work was not devoted to the American Jewish communal structure as a unit of American society or as an entity unto itself. Still, these views are presented here for perspective in examining the American Jewish scene and lay the groundwork for the ensuing sections of this chapter.

The Jewish Community and Its Organizations

The Jewish community is characterized by a wide array of organizations, both in number and scope, established and nascent. These include groups involved with international, continental, national, regional, and local concerns, across a full range of interest areas: religion, education, social welfare, health, community relations, social, fraternal, philanthropic, communal, political action, and more. Organizations play a predominant and all-encompassing role in the governance of Jewish affairs at all levels. They set policy, fund programs, arrange priorities, provide avenues for communal activity, and shape social life.

Burstein conducted one of the most recent analyses of the American Jewish communal structure. Yet, he argues that despite the central importance of organizations, it is remarkable how little we know about Jewish organizations collectively—how many there are, what types, which types are losing vitality and disappearing, which are growing, how changes in American Jewish life are reflected in organizations, and how those organizations, in turn, affect Jewish life. Scholars have studied many individual Jewish organizations and, sometimes, sets of organizations. But there has been only one systematic attempt to provide a broad overview of American Jewish organizational life: *Community & Polity: The Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry* by the late Daniel Elazar (first published in 1976 and revised in 1995).³² “It is impossible to understand the American Jewish community without understanding how it is organized. Scholars have long appreciated the importance of studying particular Jewish organizations but seemingly no one but Elazar has made a serious attempt to describe the overall organizational structure of the Jewish community.”³³ Thus, we have little idea what Jewish organizational life looks like today, but those who study Jewish organizations are hardly alone in this regard. There are few

32 Paul Burstein, “Jewish Nonprofit Organizations in the U.S.: A Preliminary Survey,” *Contemporary Jewry* 31 (2011), 130.

33 *Ibid.*, 144.

studies to describe comprehensively the organizations of any ethnic, racial, or religious communities in the United States.³⁴

In a 1990 address to the Central Conference of American Rabbis, Jacob Rader Marcus, a well-known historian of the American Jewish experience, estimated that there were over 10,000 Jewish organizations at that time in America.³⁵ Then, by 2010, Burstein estimated the total number of Jewish 501(c)3 organizations to be 9,482.³⁶ Religious organizations made up nearly 3,500 of the total (likely an undercount because of many not reporting or appearing in other organizational categories).³⁷ Synagogues experienced a small decline since a high of 4,000 in 1990. Nathan-Kazis, writing in the *Forward*, also sought to understand the scope, size, and function of the American Jewish community's network of charity organizations. He described it as "a font of Jewish power, a source of communal pride and a huge mystery."³⁸ The network's organizations influence America's domestic and foreign policy, care for the old, educate the young, and send more than a billion dollars a year to Israel.

The *Forward's* investigation has uncovered a tax-exempt Jewish communal apparatus that operates on the scale of a Fortune 500 company and focuses the largest share of its donor dollars on Israel. This analysis doesn't include synagogues and other groups that avoid revealing their financial information by claiming a religious exemption. But even without this substantial sector, the Jewish community's federations, schools, health care and social service organizations, Israel aid groups, cultural and communal organizations, and advocacy groups report net assets of \$26 billion, and generates some \$12 billion and \$14 billion in annual revenue.³⁹

Elazar is widely recognized as the preeminent scholar of Jewish organizations and organizational structure. His writings have informed generations of academics, educators, communal leaders, and students. In Elazar's view, the

34 Ibid., 137.

35 Jacob Rader Marcus, "Shabbat Sermon," in *Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook Volume XCIX*, ed. Elliot L. Stevens (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1990), 111–12.

36 Burstein, "Jewish Nonprofit Organizations in the U.S.," 139.

37 Ibid., 142.

38 Josh Nathan-Kazis, "26 Billion Bucks: The Jewish Charity Industry Uncovered," *The Forward* (March 24, 2014), retrieved from (<http://forward.com/news/israel/194978/26-billion-bucks-the-jewish-charity-industry-unco>).

39 Ibid.

North American Jewish community has succeeded in creating an impressive organizational structure. “Almost without knowing it, and certainly without planning it, the American Jewish community has organized itself politically to handle the tasks of survival and participation in the life of the world Jewish community. It has done so in ways that are unprecedented in Jewish history ... In the process American Jews have created an unanticipated polity fully within the framework of American society.”⁴⁰ It has achieved this by “transforming the passive bonds of kinship into active associational ties based on the bonds of consent,” harnessing the voluntary affiliations and commitments of Jews who have come together out of a sense of collective purpose to respond to the needs of the Jewish people through organizational and communal mechanisms.⁴¹ In Elazar’s analysis, with all its seeming disorganization, in fact, American Jewry organizes itself to be active in five spheres: the religious-congregational sphere, the education-cultural sphere, the community relations–defense sphere, the communal-welfare sphere, and the Israel-overseas sphere.⁴²

Elazar provided another essential contribution to the structural analysis of the American Jewish community. He wrote that American Jews, if they have any Jewish commitment, feel that they are Jews by choice rather than simply by birth. Birth alone is no longer sufficient to keep people in the fold. Historically, to participate in organized Jewish life in America, one must make a voluntary association with an organization.

... the Jewish people have always relied upon associational activities to a greater or lesser degree, but at no point in Jewish history have they become as important as they are today. In the past such activities have always been fitted into the framework of an organic community, one linked to the tradition of the fathers as understood by their descendants, who felt bound—by that tradition and by their kinship to one another—to stand together apart from and even against the rest of the world. In the process of modernization these organic ties disappeared for Jews, as they have for other peoples who have gone through the same process, to be replaced by associational ties, at least for people who wished to maintain the ties at all ... In other words not only is there no external

40 Daniel J. Elazar, *Community and Polity* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1976), 31.

41 Ibid., 10.

42 Daniel J. Elazar, “Organizational and Philanthropic Behavior of the North American Jewish Community,” *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, accessed May 9, 2017, <http://www.jcpa.org/dje/articles2/orgphil-najew.htm>.

or internal compulsion to affiliate with organized Jewry, but there is no automatic way to become a member of the Jewish community. To participate in any organized Jewish life in America one must make a voluntary association with some particular organization or institution . . . It is no accident that organized activity—often philanthropic in character—has come to be the most common manifestation of Judaism, replacing prayer, study, and the normal private intercourse of kin as a means of being Jewish.⁴³

As a result, the community is no longer a community of fixed boundaries within which all (or virtually all) those born Jews find and organize themselves to meet their communal needs, but rather a series of concentric circles radiating outward from the hard core of committed Jews toward gray areas of semi-Jewishness on the outer fringes.⁴⁴ The community is built on a fluid, if not eroding, base with a high degree of self-selection involved in determining who is even a potential decision-maker. There is some evidence that great gaps are developing between concentric circles. If this is so, the bases of Jewish communal life in the United States are not only shifting but eroding, with the result that the maintenance of representative decision-making becomes an even more difficult problem for American Jewry.⁴⁵

According to Elazar, a vital factor shaping decision-making is the extraordinary variety of possible forms of Jewish association. Any organized interconnections within the maze of institutions and organizations of American Jewry have had to be forged in the face of many obstacles. These include the lack of inherent legitimacy attaching to any coordinating institutions, the penchant for individualism inherent in the American Jewish community, and the difficulties of enforcing any kind of coordinating effort within the context of American society, which treats all Jewish activities as private and voluntary. The pattern of relationships within the matrix of American Jewish life is dynamic. There is rarely a fixed division of authority and influence within American Jewry but rather one that varies from time to time and usually from issue to issue, with different elements of the matrix taking on different “loads” depending on the time and the issue. Moreover, since the community is voluntary, persuasion rather than compulsion, influence rather than power, are

43 Elazar, *Community and Polity*, 12.

44 Ibid., 276.

45 Ibid., 278.

the tools available for making decisions and implementing policies. All of this works to strengthen the character of the community as a communications network, since the character, quality, and relevance of what is communicated and the way in which it is communicated frequently determine the extent of the authority and influence of the parties to the communication.⁴⁶

Of the many factors contributing to the transformation of the contemporary Jewish community, perhaps the most significant, certainly in North America, has been liberal democracy. Americans and Canadians live in societies characterized by unparalleled personal and group liberty, choice, and freedom. As never before, Jews can voluntarily elect whether and how to affiliate with the Jewish community or—if they are so moved—to create new Jewish lifestyles, expressions, and organizations to suit their idiosyncratic needs and interests. This has helped to produce a growing array of organizations in the overall Jewish community today, including the vast organizational and institutional development of the religious systems/networks of Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, and Reform Judaism. Each represents different and often widely disparate interests.

This vast communal system may seem at times to be a massive, unwieldy “alphabet soup,” but it does ultimately carry out the business of the Jewish people. This vast organizational network fosters communal stability and continuity, creates roles for those choosing to become involved, and fosters interpersonal relations among Jews. In fact, even as organizational proliferation takes place, many activists and members owe allegiance to more than one group. This produces cross-cutting alliances and more interaction among Jews. Yet, this same organizational structure simultaneously operates to create disharmony and fragmentation by providing the locus and opportunity for frequent and extensive interorganizational and interpersonal competition and conflict. The same structure that possesses powerful tendencies toward cohesion, functioning to pull the diverse parts of the Jewish community together in common cause, also contains strong forces that pull these elements apart.

Even acknowledging these seeming contradictions within its organizational structure writ large, the Jewish community can boast of an impressive organizational configuration. Yet, despite that accomplishment, we may be witnessing the unfolding of a new era in Jewish life with the emergence of a new civic culture. To Steven Windmueller, a keen observer of the Jewish

46 Ibid., 278–79.

community, Jewish institutional life is undergoing a profound transformation to a different communal paradigm, “moving from the parochial to the global, from fixed ideological, religious movements to trans-denominational institutional models, from ponderous multi-dimensional structures to efficient single-issue activities. New generations of Jews are moving past their parents’ traditional affiliations, creating their own expressions of Jewish belonging and engagement.”⁴⁷ Among the radical shifts taking place, he foresees the decline of the “legacy” organizational system and the rise of “boutique Judaism,” a shift from centralized governance to localized management, the end of ideology, closures, mergers, and consolidation of organizations, a culture of experimentation, and a culture of “free,” implying new models of affiliation and engagement.⁴⁸

As we brace for the full impact of this transformational moment, the long term implications would suggest a far weaker, less-cohesive and well organized American Jewish community. The results of these structural and social changes will be profoundly significant as the 3rd American Jewish Revolution unfolds. In turn, a communal system experiencing economic dislocation and a demographic reconfiguration will inevitably operate differently and must in turn manage its resources more prudently. Finally, the impact of these new realities will recast the role and place of Jews within the larger society as well.⁴⁹

An example of the new era has been the emergence of a Jewish innovation ecosystem.

American Jewish life has evolved dramatically over the past decade as an entire landscape of new Jewish organizations and initiatives have emerged and taken root. Changes in Jewish identity and demography, coupled with new technologies and modes of communication, have opened countless new possibilities for imagining Jewish life in the twenty-first century. While many Jewish organizations have grappled with the shifting terrain, a new breed of Jewish social entrepreneurs has embraced the chance to

47 Steven Windmueller, “The Unfolding of the Third American Jewish Revolution,” in *In This Time and In This Place: American Jewry 3.0*, Steven Windmueller (USA: CreateSpace, 2014), 236.

48 Steven Windmueller, “The Emerging Jewish Civic Culture,” in *In This Time and In This Place: American Jewry 3.0*, Steven Windmueller (USA: CreateSpace, 2014), 219.

49 *Ibid.*, 219.

remake Jewish life for themselves and their peers. What began as only a handful of innovative ventures, serving a distinct population of Jews seeking options outside the Jewish mainstream, has grown into an entire innovation ecosystem bursting with new vitality and new ideas ... Jews today can pray and celebrate lifecycle events at independent minyanim, perform community service and engage politically through new Jewish social justice groups, and load their iPods with Jewish-themed music spanning every genre. They can hike, bike, and kayak on Jewish eco-adventures and engage with the full spectrum of Jewish civilization through a plethora of websites, blogs, and social networking applications.⁵⁰

Proponents of the innovation sector argue that the

Jewish communal infrastructure of the last century was built to unify, centralize, and coordinate the fragmented landscape of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Jewish organizational life in America. Federations, defense organizations, and the denominational movements all were highly effective responses to this need for unity. These hierarchical and bureaucratic organizations drove the Jewish communal agenda and served as the primary addresses for involvement in American Jewish life throughout the last century ... Where the unity-focused system of the twentieth century sought to bring together a diversity of individuals in a single organization, the innovation ecosystem fosters a diversity of organizations that serve specific interests, or niches. These broad social, cultural, and economic changes have laid the groundwork for new approaches to building and sustaining communal life.⁵¹

In a late-breaking development, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA) reported on November 10, 2016 that four organizations have merged to form a single organization to be a central resource for Jewish innovation.

UpStart, Bikkurim, Joshua Venture Group and U.S. based-programs of PresenTense announced Thursday that they will consolidate to form one entity. The new entity, to be called UpStart, will provide services and resources to entrepreneurs, intrapreneurs and communities.

⁵⁰ Jumpstart, The Natan Fund and The Samuel Bronfman Foundation. *The Innovation Ecosystem: Emergence of a New Jewish Landscape* (Los Angeles: Jumpstart, The Natan Fund and The Samuel Bronfman Foundation, 2009): 3.

⁵¹ Ibid., 4.

UpStart will work to create a more robust platform to empower innovators and institutions to take risks, to develop creative engagement strategies, and to maximize the potential of their community-changing ideas, the statement said.⁵²

Thus, synthesizing the insights of the scholars we have reviewed, we have traced some of the inherent inconsistencies and contradictions in organizational life in America and in the Jewish community, respectively. A composite of their views yields a picture marked by proliferation, duplication, competition, the lack of clear lines of authority and consensus building processes/structures, as well as simultaneous pressures toward centralized-elitist and decentralized decision-making, and parochial outlooks. In the Jewish community we can also perceive the shifting of Jewish affiliation and commitment and a lack of central authority.

Historian Jonathan Sarna further sharpens the picture of the contemporary Jewish scene. He explains that communal fragmentation and divisiveness is a complex matter.

Notwithstanding the mantra ‘we are one,’ we know that on any given issue we are not one but many: many competing ideologies, many diverse interest groups, many different social, political, economic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Jewish unity, it has been said, is an oxymoron. On most issues, and especially those bearing on survival and continuity, Jews remain fiercely divided, with a range of different constituencies that have to be satisfied. Consensus proves extremely difficult to achieve.⁵³

But, in an ironic twist, “it is a curious fact that historically American Jewish continuity owes an enormous debt to the forces of discontinuity and dissent. . . .”⁵⁴ Citing three cases of movements that challenged communal consensus—Reform Judaism, Zionism, and Jewish feminism—Sarna uncovers a paradox.

Jewish continuity in America has been secured to a considerable degree by movements that have promoted discontinuity and discord.

52 Jewish Telegraphic Agency, *4 Jewish Innovation Organizations Consolidating* (November 10, 2016), accessed May 9, 2017, <http://www.jta.org/2016/11/10/news-opinion/united-states/4-jewish-innovation-organizations-consolidating>.

53 Jonathan D. Sarna, “Postscript—Structural Challenges to Jewish Continuity in American Jewry,” *Portrait and Prognosis*, eds. David M. Gordis and Dorit P. Gary, Susan and David Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies (Springfield, NJ: Behrman House, 1997), 405.

54 *Ibid.*, 406–7.

This is not a brief for communal dissent, since by no means have all revolutionary movements in Jewish life been salutary; some, indeed, have proved catastrophic. But at least let us remember that the potential for contributing to Jewish continuity is there. Dissent can prove to be a blessing in disguise.⁵⁵

Another way to analyze the Jewish community's organizational structure is to apply lessons from the expansive writings in social movement and organization studies. The following discussion does not presume to offer a comprehensive overview of these fields but does offer an application of theories selectively that will add perspective and texture to our understanding of organizations in the Jewish community, especially the religious sector, and how organizations play a central role in structuring the community and serving as platforms for change. This discussion will shed light on key themes of this study: organizational isomorphism, repertoire, and form. These insights help to explicate the shifting landscape of Jewish organizational life, religious schism, and the emergence of new denominational formations.

Organization Theory, Institutionalism, and Isomorphism

Despite a natural resistance of individuals, groups, institutions, organizations, and communities to social change, it does, of course, occur at multiple levels of social life. "Change is always happening, but not always in the same way. Sometimes it is slow; sometimes, rapid. Sometimes it is superficial; sometimes, profound. Sometimes it is expected and routine; sometimes it takes us by surprise and finds us unprepared."⁵⁶ At the organizational level, the dialectic of forces pressing for stasis and transformation are in continuous tension. Accounting for social change and social order is one of the enduring problems of social science.⁵⁷ According to Fligstein and McAdam:

On the one hand, many aspects of social life appear extremely stable across the life course and even across generations. On the other hand, it often feels as if change is ubiquitous in social life. We do not necessarily see a contradiction between these perspectives. We argue that stability is

55 Ibid., 406–7.

56 Mervin F. Verbit, "Structural Conditions of Jewish Continuity in America," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 48, no. 1 (1971), 10.

57 Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam, *A Theory of Fields* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).