Building the Jewish Future

Jonathan Sacks

Each year, under the terms of the Chief Rabbi Lord Jakobovits Chair in Contemporary Jewish Thought, Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks delivers a lecture on the theme of the Jewish community. The following is the text of the seventh lecture, delivered on 7 February 1989.

For the past six years the Jakobovits lectures have been devoted to philosophical and halakhic ramifications of the idea of Jewish community. This year I have been asked to turn from theory to practice. What — within Anglo-Jewry generally and the United Synagogue specifically — shall we do to secure the Jewish future? What is happening in Anglo-Jewry and what ought to be happening?

Conflicting Signs

The first question to be asked is: what, as the twentieth century nears its close, is the condition of Anglo-Jewish life? The immediate and obvious answer is that it is in a state of crisis. Synagogue marriages are down to a half of what they should be given the size of the Jewish population. Assimilation and intermarriage are on the increase. One Anglo-Jewish child in six today will experience the breakup of his parent's marriage.

Our statistical evidence of the state of Anglo-Jewry is pitifully thin, but if we look at contemporary American Jewry, we find that Jews are marrying later than any other ethnic or religious group, and having fewer children. The community is in demographic decline. Jewish ritual observance steadily diminishes across the generations. We have a great 'deal of comparative statistical information on intermarriage. The figures show that in an open society, whatever the country, Jewish inhibitions against marrying out are steadily eroded over time, and intermarriage rates tend, in all diaspora societies, to rise to one in three. We face a slow but steady disintegration in which all but the most highly committed face Jewish extinction. We are in a state of crisis.

But the second and equally well-attested answer is that we are in a process of Jewish renewal. In Hendon and Golders Green, seemingly almost weekly, new independent congregations are born and flourish. More even than they are full of adults, they are full of children. We have new Jewish day schools. There is unprecedented interest in adult education, lectures, *shiurim* and one-to-one learning. For the first time since the dawn of emancipation two centuries ago, a significant number of Jewish children are more religiously educated, committed and observant than their parents. *Im ra'ita dor she-ha-Torah chavivah alav pazer,* said Hillel. 'If you see a generation to whom words of Torah *are* precious', then communicate Torah as widely as possible. This is a generation to whom words of Torah are precious.

Nor is this confined to one or two geographical areas. Outer suburban Jewish communities that two decades ago were only marginally viable today rival in size the great flagship communities of the United Synagogue. Nor is the renewal confined to Orthodoxy alone. Even secular expressions of Jewish consciousness, like the *Jewish Quarterly,* the Spiro Institute and the Oxford Centre, are active to a degree unforeseeable a generation ago. Far from being in a state of crisis, the Anglo-Jewish community is undergoing a renaissance.

Danger and Opportunity

This is the great paradox of contemporary diaspora life. The signs point in both directions. Last year the New York sociologist Steven M. Cohen published a book entitled *American Assimilation or Jewish Revival?* His thesis, and not his alone, is that the empirical evidence can be interpreted both ways. Old patterns of Jewish allegiance are giving way to new configurations. There is a decline in traditional indices of Jewish identity, but others are emerging to take their place.

What this does *not* mean is that the two sets of evidence, the bad news and the good, cancel one another out so that we will remain very roughly where we were. It means what the late John F. Kennedy meant when he pointed out that the Chinese word for crisis is composed of two characters. One represents danger, the other represents opportunity.

It would be hard to think of a crisis in Jewish history that was not just this: danger and opportunity combined, the simultaneous possibility of disintegration and renewal. From the destruction of the first Temple came the great prophetic visions of redemption. From the destruction of the second Temple came rabbinic Judaism. From the confrontation with Christianity and Islam came the great works of Jewish philosophy and biblical exegesis. From the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition and Expulsion came the transcending heights of Jewish mysticism. From the *shoah* came the state of Israel. At every crisis the Jewish people has responded to the imperative of *kumi tze'i mitoch ha-hafechah.* One era has been overthrown: let us rebuild ourselves to meet the next. The miracle of almost four thousand years of Jewish continuity has depended on a stunning ability to create renewal in the midst of crisis. That is our challenge now, in a highly secularised diaspora.

Who are the Modern Orthodox Jews?

But there is one point which has not been sufficiently appreciated. Mobility, flexibility and adaptability to change are not incompatible with a supreme commitment to the unchanging values of Torah, tradition and faith. To the contrary, it is precisely those who are most rooted in revelation and redemption, the Jewish past and future, who are most able to react to a changing present. It is those who are rooted, not in Sinai and the messianic age, but in memories of the Anglo-Jewry of the 1880s or

1920s or 1950s, who are most bewildered by change and least able critically and constructively to assess it.

In the light of this we can understand one paradox that has emerged in the last two decades. It was generally assumed in the 1960s that there were two kinds of Orthodox Jew, those who were modern and those who were old-fashioned. In America they were distinguished by the labels 'modern' and 'traditionalist' Orthodoxy; in Israel by the words *dati* and *charedi.* What has emerged since then is that it is the old-fashioned Jews who are modern and the modern Jews who are old-fashioned.

Time and again, it has been the Chassidic and yeshiva worlds that have been the most flexible in responding to social and intellectual change. They were the ones who first detected the shift in consciousness in the 1960s toward Jewish ethnicity, religious self-discovery and the search for roots. They developed programmes of outreach. They sought *ba'alei teshuvah* and built yeshivot for them. They developed new contexts of communication: the 'student encounter', the breakfast or lunchtime *shiur* and the residential retreat. They quickly discovered the potentialities of new media of communication. They used the telephone for Dial-a-Mishnah and, in New York, Dial-a-*Daf Yomi.* Lubavitch became sophisticated users of cable television. Artscroll developed modern typography. Gateshead Yeshiva had desktop publishing before Jews' College did.

It has been the Chassidic and yeshiva groups who have consistently shown themselves able to construct shuls, schools, programmes and institutions in minimum time and with minimal resources. Because they have known exactly where they were going, they have not needed years of committee meetings, soul-searching and mega-structures of bureaucracy to decide what to do next. That has been their strength. When it has come to institutions and instrumentalities, the traditionalists have been modern and the modernists have been old-fashioned.

The first conclusion we reach is therefore this: Over the last twenty years and foreseeably for the next twenty years, Jewish life has been in a process of re-alignment. This has negative and positive consequences, and it depends on the quality of religious, educational and lay leadership as to whether this translates into renewal or decline. What leadership demands in this situation is fixity of purpose combined with flexibility of response. We must have a clear mind on what we are seeking to achieve, together with an open mind on how to achieve it. That will determine whether crisis means danger or opportunity.

Labels

The second question now asks itself. What are we seeking to achieve? But first, who are "we"? The twentieth century has witnessed an extraordinary phenomenon in Orthodoxy: the labelisation of Jews and their allocation — despite the fact that they all subscribe to *halakhah* and *aggadah,* Jewish law and Jewish faith — into different movements, adjectives and ideologies.

There is, today, self-consciously right-wing, left-wing and centrist Orthodoxy. There are religious Zionists, non-Zionists and anti-Zionists. There is modern Orthodoxy and traditionalist Orthodoxy. And there is great pressure on rabbis, thinkers and congregations to define exactly where they stand in this segmented landscape.

Before anyone answers the question, he should first ask: Is it, in terms of Jewish tradition, a legitimate question? The answer is a categorical No. Labels and adjectives have no precedent or place in the rabbinic tradition. They flow from and in turn accelerate the politicisation of Jewish life. They make the false assumption that an approach to issues of Jewish law and life can be determined *a priori* by ideology, instead of being analysed, case by case, in the light of the traditional sources. They allow us to delegitimate and in turn be delegitimated by those with whom we disagree. Labels are destructive of Jewish unity, integrity, kinship and collective responsibility.

In Jewish tradition there is a prohibition against counting Jews. When, exceptionally, there is a command to count Jews, *venatenu ish kofer nafsho,* those who are counted have to make an atonement offering. *Velo yihyeh vahem negef bifkod otam:* otherwise counting Jews is a prelude to catastrophe. Why so? Rabbenu Bachya explains. When we count Jews we treat them as isolated individuals. We single them out, one by one. But as individuals none of us can be certain of our merits. Only the Jewish people as a whole, not any isolated segment of it, can be certain of its future.

If this is so, then just as one may not count Jews, so one may not label Jews. Just as no individual can be certain that he is righteous, so no group can be certain that it is right. Only the Jewish people in its totality has a covenantal right to that confidence. And we have almost forgotten what it is to think in terms of the Jewish people in its totality, so deep has labelisation penetrated our religious consciousness.

It follows that the terms 'modern' or 'centrist' or 'middle-road' Orthodoxy are unhelpful and misleading. The Torah cannot be sliced up into adjectives. Instead there is Torah, which is timeless, and there is the application of Torah to a given place, community and time. That said, it does not follow that all places, communities and times are the same. Nor does it follow that there is only one way of *avodat ha-Shem,* serving God. The ways of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were different. The ways of Moses and Aaron were different. The functions of the prophet, king and priest — the crowns of Torah, *kehunah* and *malkhut* — were different. If we ask, then, what the United Synagogue should be seeking to achieve, the answer does not lie in any particular philosophy or movement. It lies instead in the application of Torah to the United Synagogue's specific context and constituency.

Rabbis and lay-leaders must confront this question: Since Divine Providence, not random chance, has placed me in this role, in this community, at *this* time, what is my responsibility? That question cannot be answered by looking over our right or left shoulders and trying to imitate what other Jews do in other places, times or communities. If we feel tempted to act in ways inappropriate to our communities because of pressure from the right or the left, we should take to heart the dying words of one of the greatest Jews of all time, Rabban Jochanan ben Zakkai. *Yehi ratzon she-tehei morah shamayim aleichem ke-morah basar va-dam.* 'Would that you feared Heaven as much as you fear the opinions of men.'

Including Jews

What, then, is the task of the United Synagogue? The answer has been constantly implicit in these lectures. It consists of two words: Including Jews. Maimonides uses the phrase, *le-hachazir rabbim le-dat,* to bring the many back to religion. Rashba uses the phrase, *lifto'ach delet*

le'osei mitzvah, to open the door to those who wish to perform *mitzvot*. These are alternative expressions of the value that in my fifth and sixth Jakobovits lectures I called Inclusivism.

In an open society, there is no way of ensuring that every Jew keeps *mitzvot*, shares Jewish faith or even identifies as a Jew. The challenge to Judaism in an open society is to ensure that as far as possible Jewish law, faith and community life are compelling options. This is a task of persuasion, explanation and education, not coercion. It is a task of building strong, supportive and welcoming communities. The task of the United Synagogue is to make as many Jews as possible feel included, not excluded, by Judaism.

In world historical terms the achievements of the United Synagogue are unique. In most other Ashkenazi communities the combined impact of emancipation and enlightenment reduced Orthodoxy to a minority. By 1868, Reform was in a significant majority in Hungary. That state of affairs had been reached somewhat earlier in most parts of Germany. Throughout Eastern Europe there was no Reform presence. Instead there was a rampant and aggressive Jewish secularism. Secularism dominated the settlement in Eretz Israel from the 1880s onward. Reform dominated the early growth of American Jewry.

The British community stands out as one of the few exceptions to the cataclysm that overwhelmed Ashkenazi Jewry in the nineteenth century. Despite the fact that Anglo-Jews were already highly acculturated and assimilated, more so in some respects than they are today, neither secularism on the one hand nor Reform on the other seriously threatened Orthodoxy as the normative expression of Jewish identity.

The contemporary implications hardly need spelling out. For the last five years observers have warned that American Jewry faces an irreparable schism between Orthodoxy and Reform. Over the same period, tensions between religious and secular groups in Israel have come close, on occasion, to civil war. In America Orthodoxy represents the affiliation of no more than 5 per cent of the Jewish population, rising to 11 per cent in Miami and 13 per cent in New York. In Anglo-Jewry, by contrast, two out of every three affiliated Jews belongs to a United Synagogue-type congregation. When we add the 3.3 per cent who belong to Sefardi congregations and the 5.3 per cent who belong to the so-called right-wing groups, we arrive at a figure of 75 per cent Orthodox affiliation. I believe we fail to realise how exceptional in terms of world Jewry that achievement is.

Institutional Strength

In part, the explanation lies in the specific nature of British society. But in part it lies in Anglo-Jewry's unique genius. Unlike Central and Eastern Europe, Anglo-Jewry produced no great thinkers or outstanding halakhists. It yielded no Samson Raphael Hirsch or Chatam Sofer, no Chafetz Chayyim or Rav Kook. Its strength was not intellectual. It was institutional.

The Board of Deputies took on its present shape in 1835. In 1844, Nathan Marcus Adler took office and developed to its present prominence the role of Chief Rabbi. In 1855 Adler created Jews' College. Fifteen years later the United Synagogue was formed. These four institutions have proved to be Anglo-Jewry's great creations, traditional, flexible and above all durable. The youngest of them, the United Synagogue, will be one hundred and twenty next year.

Any great institution eventually suffers from a sense of inevitability, a taken-for-grantedness. It is worth remembering that the development of Anglo-Jewry might have been quite different. At the beginning of the twentieth century there was a rabbinical college in New York called the Jewish Theological Seminary. It was headed by Solomon Schechter, who knew Anglo-Jewry well, having been Reader in Rabbinics at Cambridge. At that time the Seminary was within roughly the same intellectual world as Jews' College. A member of its first graduating class, J. H. Hertz, became a British Chief Rabbi.

While at the seminary, Schechter created an organisation, specifically based on the Anglo-Jewish model, called the United Synagogue of America. Today both the seminary and the synagogues represent Conservative Judaism, roughly the equivalent of British Reform, not Orthodoxy. American Orthodoxy, for its part, was unable to organise itself into coherent, community-wide structures. The various attempts to create a Chief Rabbinate in New York ended in disaster. The fact that Anglo-Jewry's religious institutions stayed faithful to Jewish tradition on the one hand, while retaining a commanding position of communal responsibility on the other, is a unique phenomenon.

Static and Dynamic Commitments

That phenomenon defines the United Synagogue's responsibility for the future. It is to preserve Orthodoxy as the affiliation of *rov hatsibbur*, the overwhelming majority of the community. Having devoted the last two Jakobovits lectures to explaining just why, halakhically and philosophically, it is crucial that Orthodoxy does represent *rov ha-tsibbur*, I say no more about it here. But there is one immediate consequence that should be drawn.

It is understandable that lay leaders within the United Synagogue should occasionally feel threatened when they sense that some of their members are leaving the United Synagogue to join smaller, more intense independent congregations. Understandable, but surely wrong. The greatness of the United Synagogue is that it is dedicated to something larger than the United Synagogue. It is dedicated to Torah, halakhah and Jewish continuity.

If we create in our own members a love of Torah so great that they seek more intensity elsewhere, that should be accounted one of the United Synagogue's greatest successes, not one of its failures. What, then, is failure? It is, in United Synagogue terms, if for every member it loses to one of the independent congregations it fails to make a new member of a Jew who presently belongs to no synagogue at all.

Let me propose one simple image which defines the role of the United Synagogue. It is not the middle of the road. It is a moving escalator. The United Synagogue should not think in terms of static commitments. There are no such things in a mobile, rapidly changing secular society. He who does not increase his learning, diminishes it, said Hillel, and the same applies to Jewish observance. The United Synagogue's task is to move Jews from one level of commitment to another and higher level. Some people will get on the escalator at the bottom. Others will get off at the top. The escalator will always be crowded, so long as rabbis and lay-leaders make sure that at least as many are taking the first step on as are taking the last step off. The theme of the United Synagogue should be *Shir Ha-Ma'alot*, a song of rising steps.

My second conclusion, then, is this: The historic responsibility of the United Synagogue is to shape the religious direction of *rov ha-tsibbur*, the majority of Anglo-Jewry. For the foreseeable future, there will be a small but growing minority who will seek greater Jewish intensity than the United Synagogue can provide, and a similar number in the opposite direction who cannot be accommodated within Orthodoxy. We may view the former with admiration, the latter with regret. But neither is the United Synagogue's primary concern.

Its concern instead is with the majority of the community. Its achievement thus far is that it has kept the majority of the community — that in America has joined the Conservative and Reform movements and in Israel is alienated from the religious establishment — within a positive commitment to Orthodoxy. It has not compromised with Jewish law or faith on the one hand. It has not lost touch with the feelings and concerns of the contemporary Jew on the other. That is a remarkable accomplishment and it would be hard to find another major Jewish community — other than those, like South Africa and Australia, influenced by Anglo-Jewry — in which this has occurred.

There are sociological processes at work, however, that threaten this equilibrium. To sustain it in the future will need leadership of a high order. The cause for concern are not those who find spiritual fulfilment in other forms of Orthodoxy but the vastly greater number who are outside Jewish commitment altogether. Which brings us to the question which the President of the United Synagogue particularly asked me to address. Should the United Synagogue be engaged in outreach, in active programmes to reach unaffiliated Jews?

Inreach

Paradoxically, my immediate answer to this question is No. Outreach should be done, but it should not be the United Synagogue who does it. I will expand on that in due course. The reason, though, is that there is another activity, no less important, that *only* the United Synagogue can undertake. By which I mean, not outreach but inreach.

There is no Orthodox body in the world that has immediate access to as many marginal and disaffected Jews as the United Synagogue via its own membership lists. Some ninety per cent of United Synagogue members do not come to shul even once a week. And yet these are Jews who care. They care enough to join a shul. They care enough to join an Orthodox shul. They care enough to come on the most difficult and strenuous days of the year, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. To identify such Jews, there is no need to send rabbis into campuses and discotheques, to walk the streets searching for *mezuzot* or to place advertisements in *Time Out*. We know who they are. They are the vast majority of every synagogue's own members.

Truth makes strange partners. The Chafetz Chayyim in his *Chizzuk ha-Dat*, and, *lehavdil*, Professor Calvin Goldscheider of Brandeis, in his book *The American Jewish Community*, came to the same conclusion about the effectiveness of outreach. It should, they said, be targeted on the marginally affiliated. The completely unaffiliated may be too far removed to be reached. The committed have already been reached. The one group may be impossible to change. The other does not need to change. Who, then, should be the primary object of outreach? Those at the margins.

In America, Jews at the margins of Orthodoxy have already joined the Conservative movement. In Israel, they have become secularised and hostile to Orthodoxy altogether. But in Anglo-Jewry the people at the margins are the members of our own synagogues. We have access to them. We can reach them. To be sure, rabbis and lay leaders have a religious duty toward those who come to synagogue. What is less often recognised is that we have at least an equal duty to those who do not.

What, then, should we be doing? Sermons will not help, least of all those that imply that those who do not come every Shabbat, need not bother to come at all. We must recognise that for many people, the synagogue service is at best meaningless and at worst, positively alienating.

First, we must get to know who the people are. They may not have been reached because no-one has seriously tried to reach them. Then we must create contexts in which the Jewish experience is communicated in more intimate, informal and involving ways than in the shul itself. One way is through special family Friday evenings with an explanatory service and a communal meal. Another is through residential retreats. Another is through social occasions where people get to know the rabbi and regular shul-goers so that they can feel, when they come, that they are among friends.

These are only the initial encounters. Then there must be a structured follow-through. The Lincoln Square synagogue in New York did this by creating a special beginners' *minyan* on Shabbat with a integrated parallel programme of mid-week evening classes. Jewish observance must be made meaningful through education and explanation.

But what ought to happen is only part of the problem. We have had, for some years, models of what might be done. Many rabbis and communities have created impressive projects. The question is how to turn the occasional event and the exceptional community into the norm.

Structures of Motivation

Here, I believe, a genuine effort of leadership is needed on the part of the United Synagogue and an equal response of the part of the rabbinate. The United Synagogue must define its objectives. For too long, the success or failure of a shul has been defined in terms either of its balance sheet or the size of its membership. But the size of membership tells us nothing about the quality of a congregation at all. It tells us something about movements of Jewish population. It tells us something about the proximity of other synagogues. What it does not tell us is the degree of involvement of its members. And that, more than any other single factor, will determine the shape and involvement of the next generation of Jews.

Lay and rabbinic leadership must focus clearly and single-mindedly on including Jews. It must understand the concept and what it implies. The United Synagogue must not focus exclusively on the concerns of active members. It must be sensitive also to the concerns of the synagogue members who do not feel included. In addition, it must not try to do everything at once. It must establish, each year, a particular target to be addressed by every congregation. One year it will be newly married couples; another year couples with children about to begin school; another year, teenagers; another year, singles. It must take the time to communicate that objective to every single rabbi and every single local warden.

There are distinct processes involved in generating momentum toward an objective, and each of them must be gone through. There is an initial stage of defining aims, brainstorming and generating innovative proposals. There is a monitoring stage of reflecting on progress so far, seeing how different communities are addressing the problem, and exchanging ideas. There is an evaluating stage at which achievement is assessed and the goals for the next year set in the light of that experience.

At every stage, rabbis, wardens and local congregations must feel that they are being encouraged, supported and resourced by the central leadership of the United Synagogue. They must not feel, as they sometimes do, that they are engaged in a battle with it. There must be a group that visits all communities to see what they are doing toward that objective. Shuls that do outstandingly well should have that achievement recognised. The United Synagogue should create a major award ceremony once a year, where it officially recognises the rabbi of the year, the layperson of the year, and the community of the year, judged by their imagination and success in achieving the objective of the year. The United Synagogue should shift its orientation from regulating to liberating energies.

We speak here of basic issues of leadership and motivation. In failing to understand their direct relevance to synagogue life, we are victims of a false piety. We believe two fallacies. The first is that a religious leader is one who leads. The second is that managerial techniques have no place in a spiritual organisation. It is not so. The greatest prophet of all time, Moshe Rabbenu, defined the mark of a prophet. He said: *Mi yiten kol am ha-Shem nevi'im.* Would that all God's people were prophets. The test of enduring leadership is not the ability to lead. It is the ability to create leadership in others.

And even Moses was taught this by an outside management consultant, his father-in-law Yitro, who saw him leading on his own and told him, *Lo tov hadavar asher atah oseh,* 'What you are doing is not good.' *Navol tibol,* 'You will wear yourself out.' You will suffer from what is called nowadays rabbinic burnout. *Atah sechezeh ... sarei alafim sarei me'ot sarei chamishim ve-sarei asarah.* In a word, delegate. Leadership must be encouraged. It must be delegated and diffused. Objectives must be set. Achievement must be recognised and rewarded. Every rabbi and every layleader must know exactly what he, as part of the United Synagogue, is trying to achieve this year. There must be benign competition between communities. *Kinat sofrim tarbeh chokhmah.* If the rabbis could say that rivalry and competition increases wisdom, then certainly it increases commitment.

Women and Community

One cannot leave the subject of inreach without mentioning one specific group of Jews who do not feel fully included, namely, Jewish women. The deep concern of the sages for the position, rights and self-respect of women shines through the pages of the talmudic and halakhic literature. Jewish continuity depends, more than anything else, on the willingness of Jewish women to make what in our society is the momentous sacrifice of having, raising and educating children. Contemporary secular ethics does not identify the family and generational continuity as supreme values. But the very existence of Judaism depends on them.

Paradoxically, once again, it was the more traditional Jews who saw the problem earliest and responded to it most effectively. It was a member of the Belzer Chassidic community, Sarah Schenirer, who in 1918 created the Bais Yaakov school network for girls, combining Jewish, secular and professional studies. It was the Chafetz Chayyim who declared that the modern age requires a new approach to the Jewish education of girls. In *charedi* society, the wife is often the breadwinner while her husband studies in *kollel.* No group in the Jewish world has so effectively communicated to men and women alike the value of having children as the Chassidic communities. The result, as we saw in the recent Israeli general election, has been a demographic revolution.

These solutions cannot be directly translated into mainstream Anglo-Jewry. But some equivalents have to be found. In the past, girls' Jewish education tended to take second place to that of boys. That inequality must be rectified and, if anything, reversed. Our greatest immediate need is for a Jewish education that will give girls the depth of Jewish learning of their New York counterparts.

We must reconsider the place of women in the life of the synagogue. Whether women's prayer groups are the answer, in this community, at this time, I personally doubt. I set out the halakhic considerations for and against in an article in *L'Eylah* in 1986. But the architecture of our shuls alienates women. There are alternatives which satisfy the halakhic requirements of *mechitzah* but which allow women to feel more directly linked to the service. They exist in some of the independent congregations and in Young Israel synagogues in America. Having seen some of the United Synagogues built in the last few years, I cannot believe that women were involved in the planning process. The design of every new shul should, as a matter of principle, involve a meeting between women representatives, the architect, and a halakhic authority.

No less significant, for the women of North-West London at least, is the question of the eruv. Several years ago, when I was invited to be the rabbi of a Young Israel synagogue in Boston, I discussed the issue of an *eruv* for Boston with an outstanding Chassidic leader known as the Bostoner Rebbe. He told me that an *eruv* was one of the greatest enhancements of Jewish family life. It allowed women with young children to go to shul. It allowed young families to be together on Shabbat. Jewish family life, *shalom bayit,* and the fulfilment of women are values that animate Jewish law, not to be taken lightly. No halakhic objection to the *eruv* has yet been forthcoming from its opponents. There is every reason to wish to see the eruv created with the blessing of all sections of the community, but while the discussions continue, let us record our admiration for those who have taken the initiative and made it a possibility.

My third conclusion, then, is that the United Synagogue, must be engaged in inreach, reaching out to its own non-participating members. It must see the synagogue as a spiritual escalator. *Aniyei irecha kodmin.* Obligation begins with those closest to us, in this case the alienated of our own communities. All of the United Synagogue's activities should flow from the logic of that proposition and its accompanying responsibilities. Does a project strengthen communities? Is the United Synagogue creating leadership, lay and religious, for those communities and an environment in which leadership can flourish? Is it, above all, addressing the total spiritual welfare of its total membership? These are the questions that should determine decisions and the allocation of energy and expenditure.

Buildings or Builders?

There is, though, one form of outreach with which the United Synagogue should be involved. But here I approach the subject obliquely, because it touches on fundamentals.

No talk on 'Building the Jewish Future' can avoid the profound statement of the rabbis: *Al tikra banayich ela bonayich.* 'Call them not your children but your builders.' The sentence articulates one of Judaism's deepest truths. What matters is not buildings but builders. Judaism is not a religion of holy places; it is a religion of holy people. Even the holiest place of all, the *Bet ha-Mikdash,* was twice destroyed. But Judaism was not destroyed, because it placed a priority on people over objects and places.

The paradigm of idolatry in the Torah is to worship wood and stone. The sin of the builders of the tower of Babel was to believe that salvation could come from a building. The sin of the makers of the golden calf was to turn, for their leadership, not to a person but to an object. A Psalm is explicit about what happens to any group for whom *atzabehem kesef ve-zahav ma'aseh yedei adam,* faith resides in objects. On this the Psalm declares: *Kemohem yiheyu osehem kol asher bote'ach bahem.* People become what they worship. If we worship an inanimate object, our faith becomes inanimate, and we in turn become inanimate, devoid of life or passion or fire.

We have done this in Anglo-Jewry and we have paid grievously for it. More energy, imagination and expenditure has been invested in building shuls than building rabbis, and in building schools than building teachers. We have concentrated on buildings, not builders. The result is that for the past century and a half, Anglo-Jewry has faced an ongoing problem of how to find rabbis to inspire its adults and teachers to inspire its children. Our synagogues are architecturally magnificent. Our schools are well-equipped. But they fail, because we refuse to take Jewish builders as seriously as Jewish buildings.

Recruiting Leaders

We will never solve the question of rabbinical or educational leadership until the rabbinate and the teaching profession are awarded the same status and salary as those other professions into which able young Jews are attracted: law, medicine, accountancy, management, or the City.

Many of the young Jews who go into these professions are Jewishly committed. We know them. They have been to university. They have spent time in yeshiva. They are gifted. They are idealists. Some have a religious vocation. But they are also responsible adults. They will have mortgages to pay. They will have a family to provide for. They will fulfil their leadership responsibility in other ways. They will teach in their spare time. They will hold *shiurim* in their houses. They will participate in Project Seed. But they will not devote their lives to the rabbinate or to teaching if that means that they will find it difficult to pay their childrens' fees at Jewish schools, have worries about paying a mortgage or where to live after their retirement, and will feel that their children will be at an economic disadvantage compared to the other children at school or shul.

Imagine yourself in this situation. You have a gifted child. He came top of his class in school. He went on to university where he achieved first class honours. While he was there, he made a name for himself as a debater and as an organiser of student activities. He has just graduated. Any career is open to him. In your circle of acquaintances there are solicitors, accountants, estate agents, barristers, doctors, someone in advertising, the local M.P., two actuaries and a merchant banker. You also know the local rabbi and two teachers at the local Jewish school. Tonight has been your son's twenty-first birthday party. All evening you have been *schepping nachas.* After the last guest has gone, you are sitting down together over a cup of coffee. He says: 'I've got to decide about a career. What do you think I should do?' Would you answer him: Become a rabbi, or better still, become a teacher in the Jewish school? If the answer is No, we need look no further for the cause of the problem that has beset Anglo-Jewry since its beginnings. Seminars on the role of the rabbi or the curriculum for teacher-training are not ways of solving the problem. They are ritual ways of evading it.

Why are the yeshiva and Chassidic communities flourishing while the world of modern or moderate or middle-road Orthodoxy is in decline? It is not because of a mystical power associated with the length of a beard or the *glattness* of kashrut. It is because, with certainty of conviction and single-mindedness of purpose such Jews put builders before buildings. They make every sacrifice, first to have children; second, to build the schools and yeshivot for those children; third, to support children through intensive and extensive years of study; and fourth, not to let their children stop studying until they are qualified to be leaders in their own right.

They have created communities of commitment in which every individual is a leader. We, on the other hand, find it difficult to make the sacrifices to create even the one leader in a thousand who will become a rabbi or educator. To this day, Jews' College — the oldest extant rabbinical seminary in the world — receives no institutional communal funding for its *semikhah* or teacher training programmes. Nor, despite its recent unprecedented recruitment programmes, can it hope to attract the best students into professions which remain, in terms of status and salary, unattractive and even unviable.

The Architecture of Alienation

The equation holds good in the other direction too. Because we have created buildings, not builders, the buildings themselves are the wrong buildings. If we seek to understand why small independent minyanim are flourishing, we need do no more than step inside. For the most part, they are intimate and informal. They lack architectural grandeur. They lack everything that makes an Anglo-Jewish edifice.

They are involving, intense and warm. And as a result, they flourish. Our large synagogues were built on a mistaken premiss. They were constructed to house a three times a year congregation. The result is that they encourage a three times a year congregation. They are formal: therefore they alienate children. They are anonymous: therefore they alienate adults. They have remote ladies' galleries: therefore they doubly alienate women. It is no accident that the most spiritually successful of today's United Synagogues are also structurally the smallest.

Many years ago I argued that a natural limit should be placed on the size of a United Synagogue. That limit is set by the number of individuals a rabbi can know well and have a personal relationship with. The optimum number is something like a thousand, or in the region of 250-350 families. The major United Synagogues have a

membership of something like four times that number. This is read as a sign of success. But it is a sign of failure.

A situation is created in which three-quarters of the members are tacitly accepted as non-participating. This means in turn that the allegiance of three-quarters of the United Synagogue membership is marginal as far as the next generation is concerned. Their children may join another United Synagogue; they may not. It will depend on a number of factors, primarily on where they live and what other shuls are available. But the decision will not be based on deep commitment. The rabbinic resources were simply not available to create that commitment, personal and spiritual, in their parents.

Building New Communities

There is a practical alternative. The United Synagogue should set up an outreach department. Its job will not be, like other outreach groups, to go out to university campuses or the Edgware or Hampstead streets. It should be separately funded, and the United Synagogue should create a fund-raising committee specifically for this purpose. Its task is simple. Whenever a new community, like those in the outer suburbs, reaches a membership total equivalent to three hundred families, a new rabbi should be sent out to the next area of Jewish demographic concentration. He may have only twenty or thirty families to work with. His task is, over the next five years, to create a new Jewish community. When that community reaches three hundred families, the process must begin again.

The proposal is neither simple nor self-evident. A great number of commonly-held assumptions must be reversed. First of all, it is generally assumed that people precede the creation of a community which precedes, in turn, the appointment of a rabbi. Here, the appointment of the rabbi precedes the shul and the people.

Second, it is assumed that if a United Synagogue already exists in a given area, the needs of that area are met. It may not be so. The question is not, is there already a synagogue in existence, but, is there a significant number of Jews in the area not currently members of any synagogue? This may suggest the creation of new communities not only in the outer suburbs but even in places like Docklands, Belgravia, Holland Park and parts of Hampstead. Certainly it argues the need for demographic research.

Third and above all, the assumption is that a small, as yet unviable community can attract at best a part-time minister on a negligible salary. That, at any rate, is the extant practice. I believe, to the contrary, that the new outreach positions should be explicitly recognised as the United Synagogue's most prestigious appointments and should carry a salary that reflects that fact. Inevitably they will attract young rabbis, not those with children of school age. But they should be fought for. They should be seen as the glittering prizes of the rabbinate. They should go to the most talented, energetic, extravert and personable young rabbi available. More than this: they should carry a salary sufficient in itself to tempt an outstanding young man away from another career. The very existence of such positions would be the most powerful incentive yet invented, to the recruitment of idealists into the rabbinate.

In short, this is a radical proposal. The question to be asked is: can the United Synagogue afford to do otherwise? It has seen the success of small congregations. Its challenge is to do likewise: to build new communities, communities on a human scale where every Jew feels included. Any rabbi who has been involved in starting a community from nothing will tell you that the earliest years, when the members began by meeting in each other's homes, then rented a room, were the most exciting of all. There was a sense of community, of excitement, of building something new. People who would never otherwise have been committed became involved and emerged as lay leaders in their own right.

For this there is biblical precedent. Only in two places in the long chronicle of the Israelites' wandering in the wilderness do we see a scene of Jewish unity, self-sacrifice and collaborative endeavour — other, that is, than at the giving of the Torah itself. What were they? When the Israelites built the golden calf and when they built the *mishkan,* the tabernacle. The Midrash asks: Was there ever such a people? When they were asked to build the holy of holies, they gave. When they were asked to build *avodah zarah,* they gave. What was the common factor? On these two occasions, uniquely, the Israelites were not passive recipients of God's goodness. They were builders. They were making something new.

Rabbi Norman Lamm once said that in the whole of the rabbinic literature he had found only one joke. *Talmidei chakhamim marbim shalom ba-olam,* 'Rabbis increase peace in the world.' How so? A rabbi who is at peace with himself, his congregation and the world is not a rabbi. Therefore the statement must be a joke.

Of course, it is not a joke. Jewish leaders do increase peace in the world, but only in one situation. What is that situation? The passage continues: *Shene'mar ve-chol banayich limudei ha-Shem ve-rav shalom banayich, al tikra banayich ela bonayich.* 'Call them not your children but your builders.' When our children become builders there is peace in the world. When they become merely scholars and not builders, there is no peace in the world. The more rabbis, the more rows. When Jews are static, they are divided. When they are dynamic they are united.

My fourth conclusion, a cluster of recommendations, is that the United Synagogue must return its priorities from buildings to builders, and from large congregations to a programme of creating synagogues on a human scale, where what is valued is not bricks and wood but people.

Institutionalising Diversity

There is a final point. The great Anglo-Jewish establishments — the Board of Deputies, The Chief Rabbinate, Jews' College and the United Synagogue — were all created between the years 1835 and 1870. Since then, some of the most turbulent changes ever experienced by the Jewish people have come to pass. Much has changed in Jewish experience, but those institutions have persisted. The question is: Are they still appropriate to the Jewish community of the 1990s?

I would answer Yes, but with a qualification. The institutions themselves are still effective. If change is needed, it is through evolution, not revolution; and all four have shown that they are willing to evolve. The qualification relates not to the institutions that exist but to those that do not exist. All four were conceived of, and effectively function, as establishments: instruments of consensus, representation and control. They presupposed and in themselves embodied a largely united and integrated community.

The Anglo-Jewish community, in recent years, has become significantly less integrated. There are more independent congregations. There is a multiplicity of educational bodies. There are outreach groups and adult education centres. The centre of attention has shifted from the centre to the periphery. Independence of the establishment has come to be seen as a precondition of doing something innovative and doing it quickly, flexibly and well. There is nothing wrong with this development. To the contrary, it has led to some of the most creative projects in Anglo-Jewry in the last twenty years.

But it creates a structural crisis as far as the governance of the community is concerned. There is endless duplication of programmes and overlapping of resources. New outreach and adult education programmes continually reinvent the wheel. The community can no longer be considered a coherent organism. The new periphery is more like a random collection of subatomic particles in rapid and independent orbit. This is not unique to Anglo-Jewry. Last year a paper submitted to Yeshiva University concluded that there were over two hundred groups engaged in Jewish outreach in America, most of them small and struggling. There is little co-ordination of programmes and curricula; no formal training for outreach workers; and no research into the effectiveness of the programmes.

As for the independent congregations, there is a real possibility over the next decades that these will multiply and draw away from the United Synagogue some of its most committed members. Again, this is a benign development, but it will mean the loss to the wider community of some of its most valuable leadership potential.

The United Synagogue may choose to go into direct competition and create its own outreach programmes and its own shteibls. I suspect that this will add to, not lessen, the chaos of competing groups; that it will not be successful in its own right; and that it will cause something of an identity crisis within the United Synagogue itself.

There is a similar problem in relation to the provinces. There is no country-wide equivalent of the Placements Committee that would allow us to develop a coherent strategy for training and placing rabbis and teachers. There is, I suspect, no strategy for the provinces as such within a total Anglo-Jewish framework, because there is no clear forum in which it can be developed.

The fragmentation of the community goes deeper than the multiplication of institutions. Those institutions do not communicate with one another. Mention the word 'dialogue' in a Jewish context and we think of Jewish-Christian or Orthodox-Reform dialogue, the two instances in which true conversational exchange is difficult, perhaps ultimately impossible.

The dialogues which *are* possible and fruitful are, by contrast, rarely mentioned and more rarely practised. A dialogue between rabbis and headteachers on the nature of Jewish education and the links between school and synagogue. A dialogue between rabbinic and lay-leadership on the future shape of the community. A dialogue between the United Synagogue and the independent congregations on matters of halakhic policy. A dialogue between religious Jews and Jewish secularists. A dialogue between religious leaders and Jewish academics.

The one genuine context of Anglo-Jewish dialogue is the correspondence column of the *Jewish Chronicle,* which says much for the *Jewish Chronicle* but little for the institutional or intellectual strength of Anglo-Jewry. A true *machloket le-shem shamayim,* an argument for the sake of heaven, with the give and take and mutual respect that this implies, has become almost impossible in our fragmented community. This is not to say that such conversations do not take place. But they are not public conversations. And it is by public conversations that the strength of institutions is judged.

The result is, necessarily, that we have no coherent vision of where the community is aiming, no deep and critical exchange of ideas, and no clear sense of where each of the many peripheral organisations fits in to an overall scheme of objectives. Unlike the American community, we have little statistical self-knowledge. Much communal decision-making is done without informed communal debate. That debate, from our experience, is difficult to generate, so unaccustomed have we become to talking across institutional boundaries.

None of this is necessarily a bad thing. But it will lead to a decline in the power, influence and quality of the public domain of Anglo-Jewish life, in favour of an increasing tendency for small organisations to do their own thing. The question is therefore: is it possible to create new communal structures that are not instruments of representation and control but are instead forums for discussion, ideas, and inter-institutional co-operation?

One such forum is needed to link London and the provinces for the purpose of manpower planning. Another is needed to link the United Synagogue to as many as possible of the independent congregations. Yet another is needed to link it to outreach organisations. And so on. These forums will be looser and less hierarchical than the United Synagogue. But it is the United Synagogue which can and should take the initiative in convening them.

The United Synagogue should, in other words, distinguish leadership from control. It has its own distinctive task as the synagogue body of the majority of the London Jewish community. It does not need to enter into areas in which other groups are already functioning effectively. If it does, it will succeed only marginally; it may misallocate communal funds; it will lose its own sense of purpose. What it should do is to provide for training, centralised resourcing and co-ordination. It must preside over, though not dictate, the shaping of a framework of communal policy within which the efforts of independent groups can be integrated without a sacrifice of their independence. That is the institutional challenge of the next decade, and my fifth and final conclusion.

Making the Jewish Future

I hope I have done what I promised to do: make practical and practicable suggestions. Nothing I have suggested is more than possible or less than urgent. Jews' College is desperately concerned about these issues, and so too are the teachers and rabbis we produce. Some of the ideas are radical. But before any of them are dismissed on the grounds that they have not been done before, let us remember that builders of the Jewish future do not study what has been achieved and ask why. They study what has not yet been achieved and ask, why not?

The sages made an extraordinary observation. They said: *kol makom shene'emar vayehi eino ela lashon tza'ar.* Wherever you see the word *vayehi,* 'and it came to pass,' it always signifies tragedy. But what does the phrase 'and it came to pass' have to do with tragedy? Bad things come to pass, but good things also come to pass. What did they mean?

They meant this. There are two Hebrew words that sound similar but are a universe apart. There is the word *vayehi* and the word *yehi*. The word *vayehi* signifies something that just happened. No-one planned it. It merely occurred. But the word *yehi* means, 'Let there be.' *Yehi* is the word with which God created the universe. It is the word human beings use when they have a vision of the future and set themselves to create it. There is a future that simply comes to pass. And there is a future that is imagined, planned and made. That is the difference between *vayehi* and *yehi*.

What the sages meant, I believe, was that whenever we let the Jewish future merely happen, there is tragedy. Our institutions grow outdated. Our expression of ideas loses its power. We become the victims of our own complacency. The result is empty synagogues, a declining Jewish demography and a young generation that knows little and cares less about the privilege and responsibility of being Jewish. 'Wherever you see the phrase "and it came to pass," it is a prelude to tragedy.'

The alternative to *vayehi* is *yehi*, a determination to think, shape and build the Jewish future. That alternative is on our hands, in the decisions we make in the next few years. *Talmidei chakhamim ein lahem menuchah, lo ba-olam ha-zeh ve-lo ba-olam ha-ba.* There is no standing still, not for individuals, nor for institutions or communities. Without innovation there is disintegration. Without growth there is decline. Let us set our sights firmly on the Jewish world we want to create for our own grandchildren. Let us envision that world, then analyse the necessary and possible steps to create it, and then let us take those steps. *Ein ha-Kadosh barukh Hu ba be-tirunia im beriyotav.* The Almighty never sets us targets that are beyond our reach. Let us see what ought to be and then let us say *Yehi*, let it be. Let us have the imagination and the courage to build the Jewish future. ■

Two figures wearing Tallitot.
From an original drawing by George Weil.