The Contribution of Prof. Daniel J. Elazar and Jewish Political Studies to the Training and Practice of the Jewish Communal Professional

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Joshua ben Perachyah and Nittai the Arbelite received Torah from them. Joshua ben Perachyah said: Provide for yourself a teacher and acquire a friend; and judge every person on a scale of merit.

Pirkei Avot, Ethics of the Fathers, Chapter 1, Mishnah 6

Daniel Elazar, z”l, of blessed memory, was a personal mentor and a dear friend. But much more, he mentored the Jewish world and was a personal friend to hundreds if not thousands of students, academic colleagues, and Jewish leaders, both lay and professional.

To paraphrase Rabbi Pinhas Kehati in his classic commentary on Pirkei Avot, a good teacher deepens our understanding, resolves our doubts, and guides us toward a sound method of reasoning; a good friend sharpens our intellect in the study of Torah and encourages us during difficult situations—all of which leads us to maintain a positive attitude toward others, judging them on their strengths and merits (Kehati, 1984).

During his lifetime, Elazar fulfilled all the precepts of this Mishnah in an exemplary and unique fashion. His prolific writings alongside his warm personal contact and devoted teaching, whether in an academic setting or as a scholar-in-residence, became an astute guide for Jewish leaders, lay and professional alike, and for all those in the Jewish community who had the opportunity to learn from him.¹

His thoughts and writings in the field of Jewish political studies have critical theoretical and practical application to the training and practice of the Jewish communal professional. As Gerald Bubis wrote a few months following Elazar’s death, “Elazar developed a comprehensive theoretical framework to analyze all Jewish communities from biblical times to the present, and based upon this framework he played an advocacy role in the Jewish community for well over a quarter of a century” (Bubis, 2000).

Yet, based on my reading of various articles and course syllabi, as well as numerous discussions with faculty, students, and communal professionals, less and less of Elazar and the Jewish political tradition is being taught and used to inform how the contemporary Jewish community copes with its current challenges. Bubis indicates one reason for this: “The influence of his ideas was great intellectually but often fragmented in their application” (Bubis, 2000).

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Whether for pragmatic reasons or institutional turf concerns, often there is little application of good political theory to community life, thereby leading to a fragmented community. In a 2008 interview, Jack Wertheimer more fully described this contemporary fragmentation:

_In the mid-1970s Daniel Elazar wrote a comprehensive and seminal book, Community and Polity, which analyzed the structure of organized Jewish life in the United States. Elazar documented ways in which American Jewry had successfully developed from being highly fragmented to becoming an integrated polity with its own structure for self-governance and leadership. He described the important connections between American Jews and their organizations, how the various spheres of Jewish life came together, and how Jewish organizations intersected with one another._

Since Elazar’s book appeared thirty years ago, the integration process has largely reversed. The national leadership structure of the Jewish community has reverted to a fragmented state, a condition that might be far more the norm of American Jewish life than the unified structure that briefly held sway during the three decades after World War II (Wertheimer, 2008).

One specific manifestation of this fragmentation is that Jewish communal professional leaders “were cited by peers as highly effective leaders in their particular spheres, but not as individuals who had a platform transcending their agencies” (Wertheimer, 2008).

As a remedy to the fragmented situation, the knowledge and use of Jewish political theory combined with historical example would help professional and lay leaders think and act more forthrightly toward community and away from environmental forces and institutional concerns that push toward individualism and fragmentation. The result would be an increased emphasis and a proactive return to greater _K’lal Yisrael_ and Jewish peoplehood.

**DEFINITION AND HISTORY OF JEWISH POLITICAL STUDIES**

Elazar saw Jewish political studies as a subfield of political science, with an emphasis on community:

_What do we mean when we define “Jewish political studies” as a field, and what are its concerns? Politics itself is defined with both power and justice, with who gets what, when, and how… and the search for the good political order. Jews share these concerns when they function as a corporate body as well as in their individual capacities. Political, or public concerns are those involving the community as a whole, the collective interests of those living in the community, activities in society that have a communal bent or character, and the concerns of individuals insofar as they relate to community life and interests (Elazar & Stein, 1985)._  

In the same compilation, Elazar and Stein identified 26 courses that were being taught in universities in the United States and Israel, yet only 2 were being taught in schools of Jewish communal service, one at Brandeis University and the other at Gratz College.

Six years later, an evaluation was conducted of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion School of Jewish Communal Service on the occasion of its 18th anniversary. It made no mention of Jewish political studies or the Jewish political tradition per se, but did note
an increased desire for more exposure to Jewish history (from 11.8% in 1969–75 to 33.6% in 1981–87) and Jewish issues (from 10.0% in 1969–75 to 46.6% in 1981–87), even though the number of class hours devoted to Jewish history increased from 30 in 1968 to 75 today. Therefore, as the number of class hours has increased, so have the expectations for even more exposure to that area (Bubis et al., 1991).

So how might we explain this contradiction between the desire for more of a concentration in Jewish history and Jewish issues and the lack of specific exposure to Jewish political studies? There seems to be two reasons, still in force to this day. The first is provided in the evaluation itself:

That a majority of the respondents would have liked more planning and fiscal management course work reflects such current trends in the field as the increased use of computers and advanced accounting and budgeting skills and stricter requirements for agency fiscal responsibility. It also reflects the observations of William Kahn (1985) who perceived the management component of social work education to be insufficient and of Bubis et al. (1985) who studied the expectations of executives who hire entry-level professionals (Bubis et al., 1991).

Simply put, schools and training programs have a limited amount of time to prepare students to enter the field professionally. They place priority on basic Jewish and community knowledge, contemporary issues, and management and fiscal preparation. An in-depth exploration or even a basic course in Jewish political studies loses out.

If that is the case, why would there not be an integration of the Jewish political tradition within a course on Jewish history or within one on the organizational structure of American and world Jewry? The answer lies in the small number of academics, particularly those in political science, who are trained in Jewish political studies and those in allied disciplines (e.g., history, texts, communal service, and sociology) who are sufficiently oriented toward the Jewish political tradition to integrate such material into their standing course offerings.

For example, of the 26 courses identified by Elazar and Stein in 1985, 12 were being taught in Israel (all but one at Bar-Ilan University) and 14 in the United States (all on the East Coast!). More enlightening, only 11 different academics were teaching these 26 courses. Web searches of schools, faculty, and syllabi found that less than ten academics are actively teaching in this area today.

There exists another important distinction between the “then and now.” Elazar and Stein’s compilation of syllabi demonstrated the existence of very specific courses and in-depth readings in Jewish political studies and thought. In contrast, a close examination of more than a score of contemporary curricula and syllabi in Jewish communal service programs (Brandeis, Gratz, HUC, JTS, Michigan, NYU, Wurzweiler) shows that political studies have been deemphasized, perhaps even removed, in favor of issues relating to American Jewish organizational structure and behavior, sociology, and Jewish identity. Understanding the Jewish polity as such is seldom stated in course objectives or in the formation of class sessions. Chapters and sections of Elazar’s Community and Polity at times are listed as readings, but most often relating to the descriptive and structural nature of the community. Hence, the student is not receiving an understanding of the conceptual and historical underpinnings of that which creates community.
That the teaching of Jewish political studies was so limited already came to light in 1993 in a conclusion reached by Elazar and Bubis: “the study of the contemporary community is usually not related either to historical materials or to a body of theory and concepts taken from political science or the Jewish political tradition (emphasis added)…. It is time to create syntheses of contemporary and historical analyses to aid communal policy making and leadership role definition” (Elazar & Bubis, 1993).

A COMPREHENSIVE JEWISH POLITICAL STUDIES CURRICULUM

Elazar and Bubis argued that Jewish political studies is the critical component of training for Jewish communal service:

Sound professional training and continuing education for Jewish communal service must incorporate elements of Jewish political studies. By showing the connection between past and present Jewish experience and by relating both to issues of communal organization, process, and policy, Jewish political studies integrates the professional skill development and Jewish studies components of Jewish communal service training programs (Elazar & Bubis, 1993).

They based this conclusion on the five types of Jewish knowledge required for Jewish communal professionals, as outlined by Charles Levy of the Wurzweiler School of Social Work in 1976:

(1) knowledge affecting the history and development of Jews as a group
(2) the origins, nature, and condition of the Jewish communities as they have been constituted
(3) Jewish communal structure and organization, including decision-making, planning, supporting, coordinating, and other processes, dynamics, and resources
(4) the needs of Jews individually and collectively, and the methods employed by Jewish communal organizations and agencies to deal with them, and with the needs of others whom they happen to serve
(5) the relationship between Jews and Jewish communal agencies, on one hand, and other groups, organizations, and the social welfare structure of the community, nation, or society as a whole, on the other

However, it is somewhat troubling that Elazar and Bubis did not draw attention to the dearth of trained, qualified academics to teach in the Jewish political tradition. Perhaps that was because there was a burgeoning in the 1980s and early 1990s of both Jewish communal service training, to which they refer, and of Jewish political studies, which Elazar addressed in other writings. Those trends seem to have slowed.

Meanwhile, Elazar and Bubis took their own challenge seriously—“to create syntheses of contemporary and historical analyses”—by securing funding from the Wexner Foundation to develop and publish in 1997, under the auspices of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (JCPA), a 265-page curriculum titled Serving the Jewish Polity: The Application of Jewish Political Theory to Jewish Communal Practice (Bubis et al., 1997). The culmination of a three-year planning process, the curriculum was developed with the direct involvement of nine Jewish communal programs. Four sections—“Framing the Material,” “Case Studies and Suggested Readings,” “Course Syllabi” (in which fourteen courses are presented,
encompassing the work of nine different academics, only one of whom is currently teaching in the field), and “Teaching and Learning Guidelines”— delve into Jewish political theory and explore its relevance while creating new models of application as issues change.

That’s the good news. So what’s the bad news? This enriched curriculum is not in use today either in full or in part in any program of Jewish communal service, nor was it used in full from its inception. In fact, in discussions with faculty and students, current and past, from programs at HUC, Wurzweiler, Brandeis, and Michigan, not a single individual knew of the existence of this curriculum other than those who had a part in its creation and development. Copies of the curriculum are scarce, and there is no version online. Internet searches mainly produced references to JCPA itself; no references within articles or curriculum were found, and only one “encouraging” note sprung up without any substantiation: “held by 5 libraries worldwide.” That statistic does not exactly comprise widespread penetration!

Elazar and Bubis provided different explanations for this situation. Shortly before his death in 1999, Elazar wrote an article describing the state of Jewish political studies. In it he referred to the curriculum as a step toward improving the teaching of Jewish political studies, but went on to note the following:

*Here, too, however, there is a problem. As in the case with others trained in social science and related fields, few of the instructors feel comfortable with classic or historical materials and hence turn Jewish political studies courses toward contemporary Jewish public policy issues or the study of the institutions of the American and other Jewish communities. At most there are some courses on Israel and Zionism. Even in the program to strengthen the Jewish political studies component of the curriculum, we found little response to the effort to include pre-twentieth century material, much less pre-eighteenth century (Elazar, 1999).*

Bubis, in an assessment of the status of the Jewish communal profession in 2005, offered his analysis of the curriculum’s minimal use:

*The intention was to encourage the use of the materials in all programs and schools, thereby developing one component of a common curriculum. A lack of funding for follow-up monitoring, faculty training, and updating the material prevented as much of a wide-based use of the curriculum as the authors had hoped and intended (Bubis, 2005).*

**LEARNING FROM CONTEMPORARY ACADEMIC REFERENCES**

Although only on a limited basis, Elazar’s work is still integrated into some academic programs and is applied to contemporary issues. Jack Wertheimer, professor of American Jewish history at the Jewish Theological Seminary, frequently uses Elazar’s theories and frameworks in his analyses of the American Jewish community.

In Israel, Dr. Ben Mollov has taught an MA course at Bar-Ilan University on Elazar’s approach to federalism and its positive implications for Israeli society. A 2007 article by Mollov, “Daniel J. Elazar: Federalism, Brit, and Implications for Israeli Society,” argues the usefulness of Elazar’s model of federalism to Israeli society:

*Daniel Elazar’s approach to federalism has utility for conflict-resolution efforts in today’s Israel. Both federalism and its antecedent concept of brit aim at facilitating a sense of social partnership.*
Elazar’s approach to federalism has potential to promote intergroup understanding in today’s Israel, where the previous unitary and melting-pot model has given way to greater social cleavage. The federalist approach offers an alternative both to imposing the melting-pot model on the unwilling and to abandoning the Jewish-Zionist narrative (Mollov, 2007).

In the United States, Hal Lewis, the current president and CEO of the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies, is a frequent commentator and writer on Jewish leadership. Writing on power sharing, he demonstrates how Elazar’s work regarding the ketarim, or crowns of leadership (Keter Torah, Keter Malkhut, Keter Kehunah), can be used to better understand today’s community leaders:

According to the groundbreaking research of the late Daniel Elazar, generally considered to be the dean of Jewish political studies, in this “ketaric” system, each crown claims its own source of authority and asserts its right to function independently. Not surprisingly, therefore, tensions, competition, and what might be called interketaric rivalries are omnipresent. Despite animus, however, the entire system is interdependent (Lewis, 2006, p. 63).

Gerald Bubis and Steven Windmueller, both of whom served as communal professionals and later directed SJCS, studied the formation of United Jewish Communities, “the largest consolidation of Jewish communal resources ever undertaken” (Bubis & Windmueller, 2005, p. 2). In framing their recommendations, they make explicit use of Elazar’s articulated values within the Keterim system and the Kehilla model:

An equally important framework for understanding the recommendations is rooted in a model of governance that has guided Jews for over two millennia. In one form or another, this model is still found today in most Jewish communal bodies throughout the world, including Israel. At bottom, it functions in an open, disputatious, contentious climate, yet one that respects checks and balances (Bubis & Windmueller, 2005, p. 88).

Windmueller, in an SJCS course syllabus dated 2006 on the “Evolution and Structure of the American Jewish Community,” used Elazar’s material in Community and Polity rather comprehensively throughout 12 class sessions. In addition, his is the only syllabus found to use a section of the JCPA curriculum, to which he contributed.

Elazar’s model of governance provides a fascinating context for Divrei Torah, or commentaries on the weekly Torah portion. In truth, this is a natural combination because so much of Elazar is Torah based. Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks of England uses Elazar’s wisdom rather often in his commentaries associated with covenant and peoplehood. As an example, for Parshat Devarim (Words), the opening part of the Book of Deuteronomy, Rabbi Sacks teaches,

The last book of the Pentateuch is the supreme covenantal document in history. It is the foundational text of covenantal politics.

The late Daniel Elazar, the political scientist who more than any other pioneered the academic study of covenantal politics, explains that there are three fundamental types of political structure, differentiated from one another by the way they come into existence. The first is by conquest….
The second is by organic development....

The third, born in ancient Israel, is covenant....

If conquest represents the politics of power, and organic development the politics of the elite, covenant is the politics of the word. It involves a document, such as the American Declaration of Independence, to which all sides agree to be bound. In covenantal politics, writes Elazar, “the constitution comes first and foremost because it delineates the basis upon which institutions are organized and authority and power are shared and divided. Without the constitution there cannot legitimately be politics or administration” (Sacks, 2008).

The above examples demonstrate how Daniel Elazar’s thought and Jewish political studies can be applied to contemporary situations and issues in a practical fashion and thus should be an ongoing part of the professional training process. At the same time, we must be careful not to misuse Elazar’s teachings to support a thesis or put forward an agenda. An example of such misuse is offered here, not to criticize the individual involved but to indicate the correct understanding of a well-known Elazar model.

In a 2001 monograph, Hayim Herring, a rabbi and communal executive with a PhD in organization and management, put forward an innovative model of Jewish organizational life that he labeled as “Network Judaism.” He based this idea on a “business revolution” concept of “network organizations” described by Bill Gates and others (Herring & Shrage, 2001, p. 20). However, in developing this model, Herring incorrectly uses Elazar’s model of concentric circles showing the pattern of participation in the American Jewish community. By attributing to Elazar the “metaphor of a magnetic institutional core” (Herring & Shrage, 2001, p. 9), he reveals his misunderstanding of Elazar’s concern for personal and individual motivations within those patterns of participation depicted by the concentric circles.

How did Herring make this mistake? First, he writes as follows:

It appears that there is one metaphor that seems to serve as a much-used filter for viewing American Jewish life. That metaphor was coined by the late Daniel Elazar, a preeminent sociologist [Note: Herring makes two references to Elazar as a sociologist; in fact he was a political scientist.] of both the American Jewish community and the global Jewish community. In 1976, Elazar described the American Jewish community “as a series of uneven concentric circles, radiating outward from a hard core of committed Jews toward areas of vague Jewishness on the fringes” (Herring & Shrage, 2001, p. 6).

Herring does not provide the actual illustration of the circles, but proceeds to describe six concentric circles, providing only the titles, not the commentary for each circle. He omits the first circle at the very core, “Integral Jews.”

Later in the article, Herring draws on another work by Elazar, written in a totally different context (in a history of the Federation movement: “The Federation Movement in Three Contexts: American Jewry, the Jewish Political Tradition, and Modernity”) albeit in the same year, 1995, as the revised edition of Community and Polity. He twice quotes from this article on Federations, mistakenly labeling these quotations as “more recent.” In this case Elazar is emphasizing the institutional
realities rather than the individual motivations inherent within the “shape” (Elazar, 1995b) of participation portrayed in the graphic and commentary of the concentric circles within Community and Polity.

Herring writes,

In more recent writings, Elazar again drew upon that image, describing the American Jewish community as “… held together by the strength and magnetism of its core, rather than by clear boundaries at its peripheries” (Elazar, 1995b, p. 1).

According to Elazar, it is the core that shapes organized Jewish life in America: “The magnetism of the core makes its real impact felt through the institutions of the community” (Elazar, 1995b, p. 2). Elazar seems to imply that the institutions of the Jewish community are the instrumentality through which the core asserts its magnetic pull on individual Jews who are outside it (Herring & Shrage, 2001, p. 7).

In this context, Elazar is describing the Federation system, not the patterns of participation. Yet Elazar’s own words that the core’s impact is “felt through the institutions” mean that the individual him- or herself may choose to affiliate. That is not at all the same as “a magnetic institutional core.”

Moreover, with his own wording “Elazar seems to imply…” in the above quotation (Herring & Shrage, p. 7), Herring tells us that he is taking something of a leap forward, assuming what Elazar’s intent may have been. Unfortunately, he has made an incorrect assumption.

Further on, Herring tells us that “Elazar’s model of Jewish life places Jewish institutions at the heart of the community…. In contrast to Elazar’s conception of community, the network organization model places the individual at the center of community” (Herring & Shrage, 2001, p. 25).

Unfortunately, Daniel Elazar is not here to respond. Yet we need not speculate on what that response would be. Elazar himself in Community and Polity writes specifically of individual motivations being at the core of his model of concentric circles of community participation. Indeed, the very section is titled “American Individualism and Patterns of Participation.” In the narrative leading to the concentric circles he writes,

The essentially individualistic character of American society has its effects on the organization of the American Jewish community. The nature of American society requires that Jews relate to it as individuals…. The trend in the United States as a whole is toward even greater voluntarism and freedom of association than ever before.

The patterns of participation in American Jewish life reflect this combination of individualism and voluntarism. (Elazar, 1995a, pp. 90-91).

Perhaps even more telling in terms of Elazar’s intent is his brief commentary to the illustration of the concentric circles. At the very core (i.e., the innermost circle omitted by Herring in his monograph) are “Integral Jews,” described by Elazar as “living according to a Jewish rhythm.” Those within the second circle, which Herring lists as the first, are “Participants,” described as “involved in Jewish life on a regular basis” (Elazar, 1995a, p. 92). In other words, Elazar saw living and participating within a Jewish rhythm as personal and individual “pulls”
and motivating factors to reach the core of Jewish life. “Being Jewish” and “doing Jewish” were essential to Elazar.

Members of the third and fourth concentric circles, “Affiliated Jews” and “Contributors and consumers,” respectively, are described as having relationships with Jewish institutions. However, circles five, six, and seven, “Peripherals,” “Repudiators and converts-out,” and “Quasi-Jews,” have no mention of Jewish institutions in their respective descriptions (Elazar, 1995a, p. 92).

In short, although Elazar was certainly known for his analyses and commentaries on Jewish institutional life, he saw the pattern of participation of Jews as intensely personal, drawn toward the fulfillment of the Covenant that was formed between God and Abraham and God and Moses. Thus it is not “a magnetic institutional core”; that is, the institution is not Elazar’s motivational point of participation, be it the Altar or the Tent of Meeting in ancient times or the synagogue or Federation in modernity. Rather, the Covenant is at the core, and what could be called “a magnetic Covenantal core” is still relevant today.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are offered to guide efforts to make the thought and writings of Daniel Elazar and Jewish political studies more available and relevant to the Jewish communal profession.

1. There should be an inventory and an assessment of academics who are currently teaching Jewish political studies, as well as of those in allied disciplines able to integrate the Jewish political tradition into their course offerings. An informal team of these people should then be created.

2. There should be outreach to interested Jewish communal leaders, lay and professional, to participate in learning groups encompassing the Jewish political tradition and its contemporary application. Again, an informal team of these people should be created worldwide, integrated at times with the academic groups identified in #1.

3. The curriculum Serving the Jewish Polity: The Application of Jewish Political Theory to Jewish Communal Practice should be assessed as to how it can best be used and then updated and reintroduced to schools and programs of Jewish communal service and in-service training opportunities.

4. Various modules, both in-person and web-based, of in-service training programs for lay and professional leaders should be developed. These modules should include relevant contemporary case studies that demonstrate how Elazar’s theory can be incorporated into professional practice. For example,

• Which local and national leaders wear the ketarim (Torah, malchut, kehuna) and when; how they interact and should make decisions within a value-based system.

• Understanding edah, knesset yisrael, pluralism, and peoplehood, and how these concepts can build community through stronger bonds among diverse groups: religious denominations, religious and secular adherents, Ashkenazi and Sephardi backgrounds, American and Israeli Jews.

• Applying the idea of covenant to the Israel-Diaspora relationship; the individual and the community should see themselves involved in a covenantal relationship with Israel rather than a partnership.
5. Daniel Elazar’s writings, and those of others in Jewish political studies, should be more aggressively distributed via the web to lay and professional communal leadership worldwide, along with commentary and an interactive exchange of ideas as to their application to contemporary issues.

6. An assessment and updating of Elazar’s book *Community and Polity* should be considered by a team of individuals familiar with Jewish political studies and current organizational structures worldwide.

7. Funding for any and all of the above, and other suggested initiatives, must be sought from interested donors and foundations.

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A Response

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It is always helpful to have serious scholars constructively critique one another’s works, for peer review strengthens the credibility of any field. So I want to thank Howard Weisband for taking on that task with respect to my use of one of the many contributions of the late scholar par excellence of Jewish political science and traditions (and I stand corrected for referring to him as a “sociologist”), Daniel Elazar, of blessed memory. He was unique among most academics because of his expertise in so many different fields of study and his ability to use them for mutual enrichment of his diverse and vast scholarly enterprises.

Rather than examine Weisband’s interpretation of my arguments point by point, I want to restate my reasons for using Elazar’s image of the Jewish institutional community as a series of concentric circles in my publication, “Network Judaism.” For that publication, the relevance of Elazar’s description was that it imaginatively captured how an energized Jewish institutional core, filled with highly involved Jews, creates a magnetic attraction for individuals Jews, pulling them ever closer to the center of the community. My framework for analysis was not political theory but organizational theory, and my purpose in drawing on Elazar’s model was to illustrate how a descriptive theory intended for analytical purposes was applied by Jewish policymakers for prescriptive purposes. This application by policymakers, as I explain in “Network Judaism,” has been detrimental to building Jewish community and, as Weisband correctly notes, at odds with the concerns that Elazar had about Jewish “elites” making decisions on behalf of the Jewish “republic.”

The metaphors that underlie our thinking about Jewish organizational life determine policies, allocation of resources, and priorities. In short, they play a significant role in shaping the viability and vitality of the Jewish community. I therefore argued that we needed additional metaphors aside from Elazar’s magnet metaphor, which had been misappropriated by policymakers, and so I offered a different model in describing the Jewish community, which I dubbed “Network Judaism.” I adapted this model from the world of business, which saw businesses even then moving from competitive relationships to collaborative ones to provide greater innovation, levels of service, and products to customers. In proposing an alternative metaphor for policymakers, my hope was in fact in consonance with that of Weisband’s, which is to allow for more personal pathways of entry into the Jewish community.