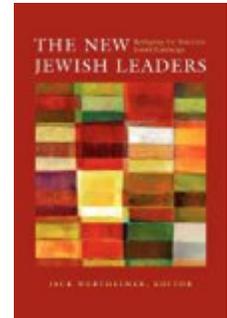




**Jack Wertheimer.** *The New Jewish Leaders: Reshaping the American Jewish Landscape.* Brandeis Series in American Jewish History, Culture and Life. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2011. xvi + 352 pp. \$39.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-61168-183-3.



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**Commissioned by** Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Over the past number of years, a new generation of leaders has begun to assume positions of influence within established Jewish organizations, and perhaps even more important, create new groups of various types. As has been described in books and articles too numerous to mention, these younger leaders came of age in a completely different Jewish world than earlier generations. Not surprisingly, their worldview is startlingly different from their elders. Jack Wertheimer led a research team that found that Jews in their twenties and thirties who are leaders of nonestablishment groups “are critical both of the agendas pursued” by “establishment” institutions as well as “the way they relate to people.”[1] The team published a research report summarizing their findings and then the full-length volume describing their analysis. This book review will focus on the book but will refer back to the research report at certain points.

Members of the research team interviewed more than 250 leaders across the country. The interviews were supplemented by surveys that in-

cluded responses from more than 4,466 Jewish leaders of all ages, providing a sound basis for comparing younger with older Jewish leaders. Wertheimer and his colleagues do not claim that respondents to the survey are precisely representative of the entire population of Jewish leaders because the absence of up-to-date demographic data on trends in American Jewish life makes it impossible to know for sure. But they do the best they can with the data available, limiting their quantitative analysis to comparisons of subpopulations. Many of the young leaders studied are terribly dissatisfied with the “establishment” groups, seeing them as unwelcoming of diversity; not willing to listen to divergent opinions; and reluctant to promote younger, liberal-thinking volunteers through “the decision-making structures.” They also criticize the values of these “establishment” organizations, with their emphasis on a survivalist ethos “and their seeming indifference to questions of meaning, cultural exploration and other forms of personal expressiveness.”[2] This is particularly noticeable in terms of attitudes toward

Israel, and in particular the willingness to publicly criticize the Jewish state. But this is just the most glaring difference. The generational divide is wide indeed on almost every issue and—perhaps more important—on theoretical approaches as well. While there is a great deal of impressionistic and/or anecdotal descriptions of this new generation, there has been relatively little sociological study.

*The New Jewish Leaders* is one step in remedying this lacuna. Based on extensive interviews, survey research, and personal observations, as well as an examination of all sorts of other documentation, including the Web sites frequented by this younger generation, the book presents a series of well-researched essays that attempts to give a broad descriptive account of the changing nature of American Jewish communal leadership. In addition to editor Wertheimer (who writes the preface, opening chapter, and conclusion), the collection includes Steven M. Cohen (the first two chapters), Sarah Bunin Benor, Sylvia Barack Fishman, Ari Y. Kelman, and Shaul Kelner. Working as a research team, with the help of three outside consultants, “we met every few months for two-day sessions at which we critiqued one another’s work and strove to understand the larger implications of our individual research projects” (p. 334).

*The New Jewish Leaders* presents the key findings of a team research study conducted under the auspices of the AVI CHAI Foundation to learn about women and men between the ages of twenty-two and forty who serve as leaders of various types of Jewish endeavors. These young Jewish leaders can be divided roughly into two groups—the establishment and the nonestablishment. Contrary to one popular perception, not all young leaders are antiestablishment. A considerable number work for organizations promoting *protective* activities. A second group is committed to fighting for *progressive* causes, while a third group is interested in *expressive* activities.

Much of organized Jewish life in the second half of the twentieth century, the authors argue, was focused on protective activities, including defending Israel; fighting for freedom for Soviet Jewry and other oppressed communities; offering financial support to the Jewish poor in the United States; sustaining Jewish communal institutions; and, more recently, fighting assimilation by offering Jewish educational opportunities in both formal and informal frameworks. The young Jewish leaders who involve themselves with mainstream Jewish organizations, such as the Federations of Jewish Philanthropy, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, Anti-Defamation League, Friends of the Israel Defense Forces, and so forth, continue to play this protective role. Others are engaged in progressive causes like social justice projects, environmentalism, and even pro-Palestinian political initiatives. A third group is active with cutting-edge nonprofit organizations that focus on new forms of Jewish culture. This group is interested in foodways and folkways, Jewish languages, and Jewish popular culture and artistic expression. In addition, there was representation from unconventional prayer services communities, also called independent *minyanim*. Many if not most in all of these categories are funded by the very establishment they profess to disdain. Are we hearing echoes of the sixties here? The text describes how this cohort, funded by existing Jewish organizations of various sorts, has launched a slew of new initiatives directed at their age peers and attempts to interpret the meaning of all this nonconventional activity. There is no consensus on what this activity means. As Wertheimer explains, “the jury is still out. Members of the research team envision different scenarios for the future” (p. 330).

As with Wertheimer’s previous efforts, the research is well done, the writing and editing is excellent, and the results are significant. The book is a bit dry and unlikely to attract the casual reader

interested in contemporary Jewish issues. But that is probably not the intended audience. Some of the researchers describe how younger Jews organize, relate to collective Jewish efforts, and think about current Jewish issues. Most attempt to analyze how they envision American Jewish communal organization. Some of the essays seem to be written for internal consumption. They use code words that may not be familiar to even relatively conversant readers and leave out details that may be of interest to those such as myself who may be more interested in the substance rather than the theory. Nevertheless, there are a great many projects and organizations that can be followed up by simply googling their names.

Some of the findings are self-evident while others are impressionistic, overly dependent on perception. This is not the fault of the researchers but simply the nature of the times in which we live and the society that we have created. According to the results of the studies, Jews in their twenties and thirties hold diverse views, some in sync with past conceptions of Jewish life and priorities, and others at variance with them. Particularly within the “non-establishment sector,” some of the researchers report “evidence” of a growing emphasis on Jewish learning and literacy, the desire to nurture religious and/or spiritual growth, and “new understandings” of Jewish peoplehood. All of this may be true, but where does that lead us? The writers try to offer us likely pathways but so much is uncertain and/or unknown.

In his 2010 report, Wertheimer argues that the attitudes of this young leadership “toward the key institutions of the organized Jewish community, the values of those institutions, and the way they bring Jews together may presage the emergence of a very different collective system.”[3] Or it may not. See the problem? Predicting the future is a tough business. Wertheimer writes that the way these young leaders utilize the Internet, including blogs, “further suggests new ways of organizing and connecting people.”[4] We knew that

already. These trends—if one can call them that—make it totally certain that there will be additional “shifts in the fortunes of Jewish organizations: Some that had been central in the twentieth century will diminish in significance; new ones with different agendas will take their place.”[5] Not so surprising, although I am still in shock from the demise of the American Jewish Congress!

One point that *The New Jewish Leaders* does make clear is that with the young leaders’ heavy emphasis on social justice, they support universal causes rather than parochial Jewish communal needs. This means that the scope of Jewish service is changing radically. This has been seen in numerous conflicts over the past several months, usually manifesting itself in written exchanges between someone perceived to be a Jewish particularist, such as Daniel Gordis, David Wolpe, or Wertheimer, and a Young Turk, such as Sharon Brous or Peter Beinart, out to convince the world that being Jewish means universal idealism in the nontechnical sense of the term.

Wertheimer argues that the proliferation of small organizations and initiatives is making it possible to address the diversity of the younger Jewish population far better than in the past. But then he asks, “what holds the multiplicity of organizations, programs, and initiatives together? And are there common concerns unifying American Jews?”[6] The coming challenge will be to find “overarching causes and commonalities” to keep the fragmenting population of American Jews unified. To achieve that goal, we will need, Wertheimer argues, “a generation of leaders who have the commitment and abilities to strengthen Jewish collective action on a national and international scale” (p. 328). But the best leaders in the world cannot square a circle. I fear we are rapidly heading toward fragmentation and dissolution. But we all feel some invisible pressure to accentuate the positive.

In conclusion, the project—because this is the culmination of a research effort and not just the

editing of a book collection--is well done from beginning to end. The research is generally excellent and the writing is fluid and engaging. But the topic is amorphous and not subject to the usual tools of analysis. This may be par for the course for a sociologist today, but as a historian, i found the sociological data on which the writing is based to be incredibly frustrating. My advice would be to download Wertheimer's many articles on contemporary Judaism from the Internet and wait for his next single-author book to come out. As a prolific writer, that is sure to be relatively soon. If you are still engaged, do the same for the other authors in the volume. You will learn a lot about what is happening in certain circles and what may happen in the coming years. Just do not expect any definitive answers any time soon.

Notes

[1]. Jack Wertheimer, *Generation of Change: How Leaders in Their Twenties and Thirties Are Reshaping American Jewish Life* (New York: The AVI CHAI Foundation, 2010), 10.

[2]. Ibid., 4.

[3]. Ibid., 5.

[4]. Ibid.

[5]. Ibid.

[6]. Ibid., 6.

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("Generation of Change: How Leaders in Their Twenties and Thirties Are Reshaping American Jewish Life," hereafter Report, p.10).

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