

Christopher Winship

The Weakness of Strong Organizations

Rabbi Herring is to be congratulated on writing an important and provocative paper that provides a critical insight into how the American Jewish community works. In particular, he points out that we think about and organize ourselves around a model of concentric circles where strongly affiliated Jews are at the center and more weakly affiliated and attached Jews are in successive rings as one moves out towards the periphery. Of course, this insight is not new. In fact, part of the evidence that Herring puts forth in support of his claim is Daniel Elazar's description of the American Jewish community as working precisely in this way in his book, *Community and Polity: The Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry*. However, as Mary Douglas points out in her classic book, *How Institutions Think*, almost no one ever has a novel idea, rather, genius exists in being able to demonstrate the importance and relevance of an idea at the critical time and place. This is what Rabbi Herring has done. Furthermore, in true Douglasian fashion, he demonstrates that the concentric model may not so much describe how we are in fact organized, as Elazar argued, but rather that it is the model we use in our thinking about institutional structure. Most appropriately, Herring points out that other models might both be more empirically accurate and normatively more successful as Jews seek to understand, maintain and expand their community.

Herring's analysis points to a more general set of issues: the weakness of strong organizations. This is an issue that Albert Hirschman has analyzed in depth in his seminal work, *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*. Hirschman's argument is that when an individual confronts an organization that is unresponsive to their concerns or needs, they have alternative ways of responding. They may simply refuse to participate further and leave (exit); they may protest in an attempt to change the system (voice); or they may attempt to work for change within the system (loyalty). Hirschman's key insight is that strong organizations are likely to be the most effective at resisting protest and attempts at internal change. The consequence of this is that they are the most vulnerable to exit. The weak-

ness of strong organizations is precisely in their ability to resist change and the potential this creates for individuals to simply abandon it.

The concentric circle structure, that Elazar claims is descriptive of America's Jewish community, is a particularly strong organizational form. It contains successive layers of insiders and outsiders with strong norms, with respect to behavior and beliefs, that govern who is allowed to be at various distances from the center. This type of organizational form is particularly resistant to protest and internal change (though there has certainly been some of both). As a result, it should not be surprising that so many Jews have exited Jewish religious and communal life.

What is Herring's solution to this? He suggests that we adopt both in our thinking and practice a much more flexible model; what he and others have termed a network model of organization. The key idea here is that there is no longer any center and as a result there is also no unidimensional source of authority. People can participate in the network organization in a variety of ways and at different points. The network form of organization is the perfect form for our postmodern identities that consist of multiple selves and interests that only loosely cohere.

Although I agree with the thrust of Herring's recommendations, I am not sure that they do not create a new set of issues and problems. To investigate what these potentially might be, I want to suggest a parallel to the American Jewish community; the modern-day university. Both the American Jewish community and the modern university need to attract participants; lay people and congregants in the first case, students in the second. These are individuals who are, in some respects, customers who expect services and choices. In other respects, however, they need and expect to be among the "owners" of the institution. As a result, they expect to have a full voice in the institutional policy decision making and are expected to be contributing members to the institution. Furthermore, both types of institutions expect and are expected to teach and socialize their participants, but at the same time assume that their members will be active participants in organizational change. Finally, in part as a result of the above, both types of institutions have the classic issues about the balance of control between the professionals (faculty and administration) and the lay people (students).

The modern university long ago adopted a more flexible form. The concept of a liberal arts education where most courses were required and aimed at providing the student with a broad education is long gone. Although students today typically must have majors and often have to fulfill a set of distributional requirements, they are to a very great degree allowed to construct their own educations. Courses in Latin and Greek that were once required are seldom taken, and it is possible in most universities for a student to avoid taking all but a few courses that are related to his/her major. This trend has resulted in a host of books, typically by conservatives, who have decried this trend. Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* and Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* are perhaps the two most notable examples.

What have been the consequences of flexibility for American higher education? Certainly, in terms of numbers and dollars, it has been a great success. College enrollments are at an all time high. Brown University, once considered the "door mat" of the Ivy League, saw its applications soar when in the 1970s it dropped most of its formal requirements. Today, it is one of the most popular universities among top college students and competes for the very best against Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. Although tuition has outpaced inflation for several decades now, top institutions continue to receive record numbers of applicants. Harvard, whom one would have thought would have many years ago received all the best applicants, has seen the size of its applicant pool grow by 50 percent in the 1990s while the quality of its applicants has improved also. "Exit" certainly has not been a problem for higher education in the last couple of decades.

However, there is a darker side to this increased flexibility. Although it would take at least a full-length article if not a whole book to document this point, I want to suggest that in adopting a more flexible mode of operation, the university has also lost its central role within American public discourse. There was a time when the presidents of elite institutions (Pusey, Conant, Brewster, Hutchinson) were major public spokesmen on the critical issues of their day. This is no longer the case. More generally, universities were seen both as repositories of central cultural

values and as institutions that not only taught, but socialized. The now quaint notion of a Harvard or Yale man embodies within it the idea that by going to a specific institution one acquired a particular set of values and even outlook on life. Arguably, universities were as much in the values business as they were part of the knowledge industry. This change has been in part due to universities first loosening and then severing their ties to the religious institutions and communities that found them. But of course, this is just part of the process by which they have acquired "flexibility."

How could increased "flexibility" have caused the changes I have described in the modern university? Let me return to Mary Douglas' book, *How Institutions Think*. Douglas argues that institutions think in ways analogous to the way individuals think. They have concepts, frameworks, beliefs systems, and the such, that determine how problems are approached and solved, how daily practice is carried out. In fact, Douglas argues that much individual thought is derivative of institutional thought. We think the way we do because of the institutions of which we are a part. It is often the institutional culture(s) that we are part of that provide the systems of thought, concepts, and frameworks we use in thinking through our own individual lives.

If institutions think, then how they think about some issues will almost certainly affect how they think about others. If universities decide that a highly flexible educational curriculum is desirable, then this will directly effect what these institutions have to say to the rest of the world about what is important and where our commitments should lie. Institutions, like people, can try to talk out of both sides of their mouths, but it is likely to be unpersuasive. More importantly, what institutions do will have major effects on what individuals will think of them. By almost any standard America has the most successful system of higher education in the world. Many would argue by a very wide margin. Yet the legitimacy and importance of America's higher education system has constantly been attacked in the last couple of decades. Much of this attack has centered around tuition increases that have consistently been higher than the inflation rate. But these attacks are often aimed at questioning whether higher education deserves its privileged position within American society whether in terms of the tax breaks or charity it receives, or more gen-

eral its (past) vaulted moral position in American society. Between the lines, one can hear higher education's critics saying, "Why should, what are essentially trade schools, have the privileged positions they hold?"

I certainly do not want to argue that we should return to the American university of the past, though I do think it is important to recognize what has been lost as universities have changed. What I do want to argue is that the American university provides an important case study for the Jewish community. If universities think in the way that Mary Douglas means, then certainly religions do. In fact, the most important reference in her book is Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Religion is first and foremost a way of thinking about the world.

We need to ask what are the consequences of having a Judaism, a Jewish communal life that is more "flexible" in form in which individuals and families connect in different ways? Reform Judaism in part provides an answer to this question. I will let the reader be the judge of Reform Judaism's success in this respect. But of course the kinds of changes that Rabbi Herring imagines are broader than that found in a single denomination. They have to do with Jewish communal life and how its is supported and enabled by Jewish religious and secular institutions. I am all for flexible, network organizations, if this means creating Jewish institutional structures that provide multiple points where Jews can acquire and wrestle with Jewish values and do so in a coherent fashion. I am much less sanguine about a Jewish life that results in what Bethamie Horowitz has called in her book, *Connections and Journeys: Assessing Critical Opportunities for Enhancing Jewish Identity*, "salad bar" Judaism. In becoming more flexible, in becoming more like network organizations, universities have lost a considerable portion of their ethnical and moral basis. It would be disastrous if Judaism and Jewish communal life were to befall the same fate.

References

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