



New study of emerging Jewish leaders shows class differences

By Jacob Berkman - October 12, 2010

NEW YORK (JTA) -- When the Avi Chai Foundation released sociologist Jack Wertheimer's long-awaited report on Jewish leaders in their 20s and 30s, the results of the survey did more to confirm what most observers of the organized world suspected than it did to reveal anything earth shattering.

But between the lines there were some surprises.

For the study, titled "Generation of Change: How Leaders in Their Twenties and Thirties are Reshaping American Jewish Life," Wertheimer and five other well-known Jewish sociologists surveyed more than 3,000 Jews aged 22 to 40 who identify as Jewish leaders and conducted interviews with another 250. The work took two years.

The survey split respondents into two primary groups: those involved in "establishment" organizations that deal with the more traditional agenda of the American Jewish community -- such as Jewish federations, AIPAC and the Anti-Defamation League -- and those involved in "non-establishment" organizations, such as Jewish start-ups, social service groups and organizations built around recreation with some sort of Jewish connection.

Among other findings, the survey uncovered something of a class distinction within the young, engaged Jewish world: The more upwardly mobile seemed to affiliate with the traditional, establishment Zionist and Jewish organizations -- what Wertheimer calls protective organizations -- while young leaders involved in non-establishment, progressive start-ups seemed to belong more to the traditional middle class.

"What we found is that people who are in law, for example, or real estate or out in Hollywood in parts of the entertainment industry are interested in the networking that Jewish organizations offer," Wertheimer told JTA. "So they are more attracted to the networking opportunities that the establishment provides -- particularly the federations and parts of the American Jewish Committee and the ADL -- whereas the non-establishment [leaders] tend to earn less and tend to be in not-for-profit work or in the helping professions."

The survey defined as leaders anyone who runs a Jewish organization, has a Jewish project, is involved in Jewish organizations or is a Jewish thinker. The survey assumed that these people would likely be in control of the organized Jewish community over the next several decades.

Wertheimer first announced the preliminary findings of his report at this past spring's Jewish Funders Network conference.

He found that those who call themselves Jewish leaders are a diverse lot that have varying affiliations with traditional or non-traditional Jewish organizations, and their views on Israel, assimilation and anti-Semitism tend to vary in relation to their organizational affiliation.

Because they share highly critical views toward key organizations and synagogues, and many work outside traditional communal institutions, these future leaders are leading the Jewish world down a new path, Wertheimer said.

"We have a story of quite dramatic change," he said.

The report found that leaders in both groups -- establishment and non-establishment -- feel a strong sense of Jewish identity

and belonging to the Jewish people, and many of them share similar Jewish backgrounds.

Approximately 40 percent of individuals in both categories attended Jewish day schools. Seventy-one percent attended Jewish camps, 89 percent have two Jewish parents and about 45 percent come from homes described as Conservative. A low percentage come from Reform homes. About 55 percent of the leaders in both groups have spent time in Israel.

This is proof that whatever Jewish identity-building mechanisms the community has invested in are working, Wertheimer said.

If there is one similarity between young leaders of the establishment organizations and young leaders of the start-up world, the survey showed, it is that they both feel a strong sense of Jewish identity and belonging to the Jewish people. The differences emerge in the intensity of that sense of belonging and connection to the Jewish community.

According to the survey, 73 percent of the young leaders in non-establishment organizations have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people, while 75 percent in the establishment organizations feel the same. On the other hand, 64 percent of the non-establishment set say they feel part of the Jewish community, compared to 73 percent of the young leaders in establishment organizations.

The viewpoints really start to diverge when it comes to the issues of Israel, anti-Semitism, intermarriage and the value of social service.

Those involved in establishment organizations feel more strongly about Israel being central to their Jewish identities (51 percent of the establishment set vs. 32 percent of the non-establishment set), more emotionally attached to Israel (62 percent vs. 55 percent), more concerned about threats to Israel's security (43 percent vs. 23 percent) and more worried about intermarriage (35 percent vs. 17 percent).

Some 39 percent of those under 40 are involved in some mix of establishment and start-up organizations, while only 27 percent were involved exclusively in establishment groups.

The study also indicates that the establishment of today is very similar in thought to the non-establishment of yesterday.

Regarding questions about Israel's security, fears of anti-Semitism and the importance of Holocaust remembrance, there is a difference between the establishment and start-up groups. However, even young leaders from establishment organizations are less fearful than the older generation of establishment leaders.

According to the study, 23 percent of young people and 39 percent of older people in the non-establishment world are concerned about threats to Israel's security, compared to 43 percent of establishment young people and 59 percent of older establishment leaders. At the same time, 9 percent of young people and 14 percent of older people in the start-up cohort are worried about anti-Semitism in the United States, compared to 19 percent of both younger and older leaders in the establishment group.

On the question of the importance of remembering the Holocaust, 23 percent of young people and 36 percent of older people in the start-up cohort believe it is essential, compared to 39 percent of young establishment leaders and 45 percent of older establishment types.