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Establishment and non-establishment spheres serve diverse Jews

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"Lila," a young Jewish woman in Los Angeles, has been involved in a professional or volunteer capacity with a number of Jewish organizations, including Yiddishkayt Los Angeles (a culture group), IKAR (a new spiritual community), and Progressive Jewish Alliance (PJA, a social justice group). "Zev," a young Jewish man in Los Angeles, is a lay leader at AIPAC (an Israel lobbying group) and Friends of the Israeli Defense Forces (FIDF, a philanthropic group) and has attended events of the Jewish Federation and Guardians of the Jewish Home for the Aging. Although both Lila and Zev are active Jewish leaders in Los Angeles with extensive social circles, they have never met.

Why do American Jews divide themselves not just by ethnicity and denomination, but also as "mainstream" and "innovative"? In the past year and a half I conducted research to find out. My findings may be of interest to anyone with a stake in the Jewish community.

Leaders of organizations in the two spheres differ in a number of ways. First, Zev and other leaders of establishment groups tend to have a mainstream orientation and be politically centrist or right wing. Many, especially Orthodox Jews and children of immigrants, feel a sense of responsibility toward Jews and take a "survivalist" or "protective" approach to Jewish issues, meaning they are concerned about the survival of the Jewish people. One Federation and AIPAC leader said he is kept up at night worrying about the security of Israel and "whether or not my grandkids will be Jewish." In contrast, Lila and other leaders of new groups like PJA, Reboot, and JDub Records tend to have an unconventional orientation, be left wing politically, have ambivalent views about Israel, reject the taboo against intermarriage, and feel responsibility toward the most needy (regardless of whether they are Jews). A leader of PJA feels that the most pressing issue facing American Jews is public school education and finds the "conservative narrative of 'continuity'...both alienating and offensive." In their charitable giving, several non-establishment leaders contribute mostly to non-Jewish organizations or Jewish organizations that benefit mostly non-Jews, like American Jewish World Service. These conclusions were not surprising, given the different goals of establishment and non-establishment organizations.

A finding I did not expect was that leaders in the two spheres differ in occupation and class. Most of the lay leaders at establishment organizations are in for-profit fields like law, business, and finance, and most of the lay leaders at non-establishment organizations are public interest lawyers, educators, artists, and professionals at nonprofit organizations. For example, Zev is an entrepreneur and small business owner, and Lila has worked for a number of arts and Jewish nonprofits. How can this occupational split be explained? First, the primary mandate of several establishment organizations, including Federation, FIDF, and Guardians, is to raise and distribute funds, and they do this partly by encouraging participants with great financial capacity to take on leadership roles. In non-establishment organizations, fundraising is important but generally secondary to their activism and community building.

Another explanation for the occupational split is that Jewish communal involvements are connected to social networks (face-to-face, not just online). People spend time with their colleagues in and out of the workplace, and they make decisions about which events to attend and boards to join partly based on what their colleagues are doing. Individuals' Jewish communal involvements help them strengthen their social and professional ties. Realtors, mortgage brokers, and real estate lawyers rely on each other to connect them to clients. Entertainment financiers, producers, and agents succeed when they know and are known by many people in their field. It is no secret that the Federation system taps into the professional need to network – and no surprise that the three most prominent occupation-based divisions in the Los Angeles Federation are Legal, Entertainment, and Real Estate and Construction. People meet each other at the events, and their stature in their field grows as they take on Federation leadership roles and make large publicly acknowledged gifts. In fact, a young man I met at a Federation dinner told me that he and his friends were there for the networking: "Older people don't need the networking – they do it to be good. When young people do it to be good, that's when the deals come."

It is not only establishment leaders who benefit from occupation-based networking. Several young leaders in the nonprofit sector told me they got jobs or job-related skills and contacts through their volunteer involvements in PJA, IKAR, Reboot, Jewish Funds for Justice Selah fellowship, and Yiddishkayt L.A. Some of these individuals transitioned from lay leaders to professional leaders at a Jewish organization, and some advanced at other nonprofits. In short, Jews get involved with particular Jewish organizations partly because of their occupation, and their participation in those organizations helps them advance in pursuit of their professional goals.

Related to the occupational split, I found that establishment organizations attract Jews who are part of or striving toward the "upper class." Leaders of FIDF and the Guardians described their target groups as "either very successful in business or very upwardly mobile" and "very Hillcrest, very Brentwood Country Club" (prestigious and heavily Jewish country clubs in West Los Angeles). Establishment organizations plan events with such a crowd in mind, finding a "Malibu mansion," "private Bel Air residence," or "trendy club" for their cocktail parties and summer soirées. In contrast, I rarely heard about up-scale events from non-establishment organizations. When their leaders describe their programs, words like "edgy" and "provocative" come up more than "sophisticated" and "glamorous."

These differences were on display at the 2009 annual dinners of two groups: the Progressive Jewish Alliance ("PJA 10 Live: Advocacy for a New Era") and the Federation's Real Estate and Construction Division ("Gala of the Legends"). At the PJA event, guests munched on chips and dips next to a display of fair-trade basketballs and sneakers and were entertained by a hip hop dance troupe and a Korean drumming ensemble. Slide shows highlighted many under-40 Jews (and some non-Jews) who are involved in PJA. The tribute booklet was 91 pages and had an edgy cover with graffiti-like art. Speeches focused on justice and equality for all. And the most prominent cars in the parking lot were Priuses, several with Obama bumper stickers.

At the Federation event, tuxedoed servers circulated plates of beef skewers with peanut sauce while guests sipped cocktails and watched slideshows of Federation beneficiary organizations. A cantorial soloist sang the American and Israeli national anthems, and video presentations honored four octogenarian Federation mega-donors / real estate giants. The tribute book featured 224 glossy pages color-coded by amount of donation. Speeches focused on making donations, helping Jews in need, and networking with other real estate professionals. And the most prominent cars at the valet were Lexuses, BMWs, and Audis.

A takeaway message of my research is that establishment and non-establishment organizations in Los Angeles (and elsewhere) are attracting diverse crowds and filling important niches. The aesthetic differences in the groups' events are important for furthering their missions – and for building community among a diverse population of Jews in Los Angeles.

Even though there are deep-seated differences between establishment and non-establishment groups and their leaders, there is also a good deal of overlap. Organizations like American Jewish Committee, JConnect, 30 Years After, Federation's New Leaders Project, and Jumpstart serve as bridges between the spheres. Groups in the two spheres sometimes co-sponsor events, and some leaders and participants are involved in both spheres. An example is "Isaac," a young Iranian-American lawyer involved with several organizations, including Federation, AIPAC, 30 Years After, and PJA. Isaac and a few others are encouraging interaction between the spheres, and partly because of them, organizations are beginning to collaborate and learn from each other's experience. Who knows: Maybe someday Lila and Zev will meet.

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