

## Jewish Nonprofit Organizations in the U.S.: A Preliminary Survey

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**Abstract** Organizations are at the heart of American Jewish life. Though there has been considerable research on specific organizations and types of organizations, there has been very little on the overall organizational structure of the Jewish community. This article takes some preliminary steps in that direction. It pulls together historical data on American Jewish organizations and data on contemporary Jewish organizations from a source not previously used: the U.S. Internal Revenue Service’s database on nonprofit charitable organizations. A majority of the 9,482 Jewish organizations listed are educational and religious but there are significant numbers of other types as well. Hundreds of organizations link American Jews to Israel and close to 300 link American Jews to Jews in other countries. New York State remains the organizational center of American Jewry. Few organizations are targeted to the needs of Jewish young adults. An agenda for future research is provided.

**Keywords** Jews · United States · Voluntary organizations · Educational · Religious

There are many ways to think of Jewish life in the U.S.—in terms of religious observance, psychological identification with the Jewish people, involvement in Jewish organizations, etc. But surely one of the most important is in terms of Jewish organizations themselves. As Daniel Elazar (1995, p. 20) wrote, “To participate in any organized Jewish life in America one must make a voluntary association with some particular organization or institution... the Jewish people have always relied

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upon associational activities to a greater or lesser degree, but at no point in Jewish history have they become as important as they are today.”

Reflecting this importance, scholars have studied many individual Jewish organizations and sometimes, sets of organizations; general histories of American Jewish life recognize the importance of organizations as well. It is therefore remarkable how little we know about Jewish organizations collectively—how many there are, of what types, which types are losing vitality and disappearing, which are growing, how changes in American Jewish life are reflected in organizations and how those organizations in turn affect Jewish life. There has been only one systematic attempt to provide a broad overview of American Jewish organizational life—Elazar’s *Community & Polity: the Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry*, first published in 1976 and revised in 1995. *Community & Polity* was rightly described by one reviewer (Horowitz 1977, p. 288) as “a statistical mine of information pulling together in one place what not even the *American Jewish Yearbook* provides...,” yet no one knew better than Elazar the limits of his data. Even with regard to information as basic as the number of synagogues, the data he found were “fragmentary” (Elazar 1995, p. 374). “The basic institutions of the American Jewish community are essentially local,” he wrote (1995, p. 174) but his description of the “organizations and institutions” of the American Jewish community (pp. 235–245) includes only national organizations; he wrote of local organizations being distributed among “five spheres of community activity” but has no data even on how many of each type there are (pp. 278–279). The *American Jewish Year Book* provided annually for over a 100 years an invaluable list of national and local Jewish organizations and publications but neither said much about what the organizations did nor analyzed trends in Jewish organizational life. Dobkowski (1986), O’Brien (1986) and Rosen (1983) published lists and very brief descriptions of many Jewish organizations but, again, provided no analysis. Elazar has had no followers.

This article tries, in a very modest way, to return to the task of systematically describing and analyzing the overall organization of the American Jewish community. Because we cannot understand Jewish organizational life today without knowing its history, the article begins historically, drawing on sometimes obscure sources to describe how the number and types of Jewish organizations have changed since the 19th century. The article then proceeds to describe contemporary Jewish organizations using data from a source seemingly never used before to describe a religious or ethnic community: the list of non-profit charitable organizations granted tax-exempt status by the U.S. Internal Revenue Service (IRS), known as 501(c)(3) organizations for the section of the Internal Revenue Code that defines their status. As the article brings together historical and contemporary sources and tries to set forth an agenda for future research, it necessarily considers data quality and organization, building on past work when appropriate and outlining where new approaches are needed. Careful thinking about data is essential if we are to learn about the overall organization of the Jewish community; such thinking is especially important when trying to consolidate and expand the sources of data being utilized.

There are no good models for doing this. The U.S. government conducts no census of organizations; lists of organizations compiled by private organizations are

typically narrow and often hard to find (Spaeth and O'Rourke 1994). There are no comprehensive studies of the organizations of *any* American ethnic, racial, or religious group. Thus, the article faces special challenges but, to the extent it succeeds, it may encourage more research on other groups.

### **American Jewish Organizations: Historical Perspective**

Jewish community leaders have long believed it important to know the size of the Jewish population and how it is organized and have devoted considerable resources to gathering data. But concerns about data quality—sometimes discussed by researchers, sometimes apparent only in retrospect—require us to be cautious when using the data to describe the American Jewish community historically and demand consideration when carrying out new research.

Jacob Rader Marcus (1990) compiled all the available data on the size of the Jewish population, by locality, state and nationally, beginning with an estimate of 24 in 1654 and reaching a pre-1990 peak of perhaps 5,800,000 in 1984 (Marcus 1990, pp. 237–243). His compilation is a vital resource but he knew its limits (1990, p. 4): “From the point of view of accuracy the statistics printed here fall into three categories: the relatively accurate census, scientific sampling and, finally, pure conjecture...” When the \$6 million 2000–2001 National Jewish Population Survey, conducted by highly trained scholars using the methods of modern social science, produced surprisingly low estimates of the number of Jews in the U.S., the resulting controversies about research methods led to an alternative estimate, based on other data, 15% higher (Kadushin et al. 2005; Saxe et al. 2007).

Jewish organizations were long a focus of one of the most important sources of information ever published about Jews in the U.S. and around the world: the *American Jewish Year Book (AJYB)*. Its very first volume, 1899–1900, focused on Jewish organizations. Cyrus Adler's preface (1899, p. ix) declared that “The spread of Jews all over our vast country seemed to make it desirable that a Directory should form the principal feature of this Year Book.” Almost 90% of the first volume's text (not counting advertisements) was devoted to lists of local and national Jewish organizations and periodicals and a considerable proportion of all subsequent volumes was as well. Yet Adler had to note that “The difficulties in compiling [the data] were very great, arising partly from an inability to secure the names of minor organizations in large cities and of any organization in small towns, partly from the unwillingness of the officers of some Congregations and Societies to fill out the blanks sent them.” The *AJYB* made no claim that the lists were complete, nor did it publish detailed descriptions of how the data were collected or of possible sources of error. We therefore can only guess how accurate the lists were as descriptions of American Jewish organizational life.

The most elaborate effort to collect data on Jewish organizations seems to have been made by H.S. Linfield of the Jewish Statistical Bureau in 1927. While collecting data on Jewish congregations for the U.S. Census of Religious Bodies, Linfield also gathered data (under the auspices of the American Jewish Committee) on the size of the Jewish population and “the number and work of Jewish

organizations, other than the congregations” (Linfield 1930, pp. xi–xii). He wrote that “A wide canvass, chiefly through the mails, brought returns from Jewish groups residing in a total of 3,140 cities, towns, villages, and rural districts... The writer had the co-operation of the national federations of congregations and of over one hundred and fifty Jewish national organizations all over the country. The writer also enjoyed, through correspondence, the co-operation of over 1,100 important local Jewish organizations; and numerous rabbis and social workers lent their assistance in the collection of the data.” Even so, the data provided by many organizations were fragmentary; Linfield responded by sampling some types of organizations, making special efforts to collect data on the sample and then trying to generalize to the Jewish community as a whole (pp. 140–147).

The 1927 study was not repeated and it is easy to imagine why. In 2000, the Research Department of United Jewish Communities attempted simply to find out the number of synagogues in the U.S. The researchers, Jim Schwartz and Jeffrey Scheckner, remarked (Jones et al. 2002, p. 535) that “The process was far more complicated and cumbersome than anticipated... The search was exhaustive and we are confident that this is the best possible enumeration of synagogues that we can do, a project which to the best of our knowledge has never previously been undertaken...[addressing] complex definitional and methodological issues.” The effort required to describe all, or even most, Jewish organizations would be truly staggering.

Schwartz and Scheckner were wrong about there having been no previous enumerations of synagogues; there had been nine between 1850 and 1936 as part of U.S. government censuses of religious bodies (Linfield 1939, p. 5). Schwartz and Scheckner do not delineate what definitional and methodological issues they faced but Linfield’s description of the earlier studies may provide some indication. An important issue was how “church” (congregation) was defined—synagogues were initially thought of as Jewish churches by the census. From 1850 to 1870, the U.S. marshals who collected the data were given only general guidelines as to what constituted a congregation, focusing on whether organizations “had the character of an institution” and “were known in the community” (Linfield 1939, pp. 15–18). Beginning in 1890, the term “religious organization” replaced “church,” the focus shifted to whether the organizations had members and “a form of organization” and more effort was made to ensure uniformity. According to Linfield (1939, pp. 9, 29), the narrow 1850 definition excluded many Jewish congregations; the 1850 census figure was 37 but by searching through other sources, Linfield himself (many years later) found evidence of at least 76.

### How Many Synagogues?

From the 37 synagogues found by the first U.S. Census of religious bodies (Table 1), the number increased in parallel with the Jewish population, seemingly peaking at just under 4,000 in 1990 and declining slightly thereafter.<sup>1</sup> The number

<sup>1</sup> Elazar (1995, p. 374) claimed that “there are over 4500 Jewish congregations in the United States, according to the fragmentary figures available.” He cited no source for this figure, and the highest documented number I could find is the 3,975 in Table 1.

**Table 1** Number of synagogues and Jewish population in the U.S. 1850–2000

Year	Number of synagogues	U.S. Jewish population, range of estimates	Synagogues/1,000 Jews, average of population estimates
1850	37 <sup>a</sup>	50,000 (6,000–750,000) <sup>b</sup>	.74
1860	77	125,000–200,000	.49
1870	189	200,000–600,000	.47
1877	277	190,000–250,000	1.26
1890	533	400,000–475,000	1.22
1900	848	938,000–1,300,000	.78
1906–1907	1,769	1,400,000–1,770,000	1.13
1916–1917	1,901	3,000,000–3,389,000	.60
1918	2,960 <sup>c</sup>	3,389,000	.87
1926–1927	3,118	4,081,000–4,228,029	.75
1937	3,728	4,770,000–4,831,000	.78
1990	3,975	5,515,000–5,981,000	.69
2000	3,727	5,340,000–6,155,000	.65

<sup>a</sup> Linfield (1939, p. 9) independently estimated a total of 76. The official figure is included here for the sake of comparability with later official figures; see text for fuller explanation

<sup>b</sup> Estimate of number of synagogues per 1,000 population is based on 50,000 Jews

<sup>c</sup> The 2,960 is described as the sum of 1,843 synagogues outside New York City, 1,127 within

*Sources:* Number of synagogues: 1850, 1860, 1870, Linfield 1939, pp. 29–30; 1877, Linfield 1939, p. 17; 1890, Linfield 1939, p. 40; 1900, Linfield 1939, p. 50; 1906, 1916, 1926, Linfield 1939, p. 7; 1918, *American Jewish Year Book* 21 (1919, pp. 330–331); 1937, Linfield 1945, p. 644; 1990, Bradley et al. 1992, p. 3; 2000, Jones et al. 2002, p. 4

Population estimates: 1850, Linfield 1945, p. 644 (estimate of 50,000), Marcus 1990, p. 239 (range); 1860, Sarna 2004, p. 375; 1870, Marcus 1990, p. 240; 1877, Marcus 1990, p. 240, Linfield 1945, p. 644; 1890, 1990, 2000, Sarna 2004, p. 375; 1900, Marcus 1990, p. 240; 1907, 1917, 1927, 1937, Marcus 1990, p. 241, Linfield 1945, p. 644; 1918, Marcus 1990, p. 241

relative to the size of the Jewish population has varied from around one synagogue for every 2,000 Jews in the mid-19th century, to one for every 800 or so in 1877, with the most recent figure (for the year 2000) showing one synagogue for roughly every 1,500 Jews—to the extent we can rely on these data.

Estimates of the Jewish population at particular times sometimes vary a great deal, including the absurd range of estimates in 1850—from 6,000 to 750,000—the highly problematic range of 200,000 to 600,000 in 1870 and the very controversial estimates in 2000, with the lower estimate suggesting decline and the higher, growth.

Estimates of the number of synagogues present problems as well. The overall trend, with population and the number of synagogues rising together, seems reasonable. Yet there are at least three anomalies in the table. Linfield claimed that the U.S. Census failed to count half the synagogues existing in 1850. The 50% increase in the number between 1917 and 1918 seems implausible, even taking into account the hint in the *AJYB* (1919, p. 331) that the 1918 effort to find synagogues in New York City had been especially thorough. The apparent doubling of the

number between 1900 and 1906–1907 seems unlikely as well; no one has tried to explain it.

There seem to be almost no data on types of congregations. An 1854 directory (Linfield 1939, p. 14) categorized them by *minhag* (longstanding customs) into German, Polish, Portuguese, Bohemian and Dutch. The 1890 census of congregations distinguished between Reform and Orthodox but Orthodox was simply a residual category, apparently including every congregation not part of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (Linfield 1939, p. 19). Data do not seem to be available otherwise.

### National Jewish Organizations

The *AJYB* survey of national Jewish organizations appeared annually after 1899. Special efforts toward comprehensiveness were made in 1907 and 1918; the organizations were first categorized (as opposed to simply being listed) in 1918 but not again for decades.

The *AJYB* recorded 19 national organizations in 1899 (Table 2). Some still play a significant role in Jewish life, including the American Jewish Historical Society, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (Reform), the Council of Jewish Women (now the National Council of Jewish Women) and B'nai B'rith. Others were predecessors to contemporary organizations; today's United Jewish Communities can trace its origins back to the National Conference of Jewish Charities, founded in 1899 and the Zionist Organization of America to the Federation of American Zionists founded in 1897. Some, such as the National Farm School and the Independent Order Free Sons of Israel, have faded away.

By 1907 the number of national organizations had risen to 47; by 1918, to 76. The categorization of the 76 is less helpful than it might be. The *AJYB* was explicit about how some organizations were classified but as to the rest stated simply that “no explanation... is necessary” (p. 303). Yet explanations would have been useful, because some of the examples seem far from obvious today. The American Jewish Committee and American Jewish Congress, later classified as community relations organizations, were considered international organizations in 1918, while the Jewish Academicians of America, described by Marcus (1989, p. 188) as a “modest group of some twenty-four members [which] set out to inaugurate an Orthodox counter reformation based on modernism,” was classified as a research organization.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Zionist organizations (listed in Table 2 by a later name, Israel-related) formed a smaller proportion of the total than they did later, not surprising given the newness and small size of the Jewish settlement in Palestine. The substantial percentage of national organizations described as social-mutual benefit and fraternities probably reflects both the attempt of Jews, as a new, largely immigrant group, to meet their own needs and the general popularity in late 19th-century America of fraternal organizations (Moore 1981, p. 9; Skocpol et al. 2000). The greater prevalence of social welfare organizations in 1918 rather than later, likewise makes sense in light of the poverty of so many new immigrants.

The number of national organizations rose to 127 in 1930 and 219 in 1940. Beginning in 1950, the *AJYB* again categorized organizations by their “function or

**Table 2** National Jewish organizations, by primary function, from *American Jewish Year Book*

Primary function of organization	1918	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2007
Community relations	–	13	13	19	22	26	29	31
Cultural	–	26	26	28	34	45	56	56
Research <sup>a</sup>	3							
Israel-related	8	50	56	46	53	72	87	88
Overseas aid	–	23	11	13	11	12	11	12
International <sup>b</sup>	6							
Religious, educational	–	53	60	63	67	71	58	53
Religious	5							
Educational	6							
Schools, institutions	4	–	–	–	–	–	26	25
Social, mutual benefit	15	60	24	19	17	14	13	14
Fraternities	6							
Social welfare	15	24	26	24	20	28	29	28
Professional	8							
Total	76	249	216	212	224	268	309	307

Total for 1899: 19; for 1907: 47; 1930, 127; 1940, 219

Note on categories: Some changed over time. When the name of a category changed but the organizations included did not, the category was treated as if it were the same for the entire period. Community relations were called “civic defense, political” in 1950 and “community relations, political” in 1960. Israel-related was “Zionist” in 1918 and “Zionist and pro-Israel” from 1950 through 1990. Schools and institutions were called colleges in 1918. Social, mutual benefit was called fraternal orders and mutual benefit in 1918; after 1918, fraternities were included in this category. Social welfare was called philanthropic in 1918

<sup>a</sup> Includes organizations later categorized as cultural, including American Jewish Historical Society

<sup>b</sup> Includes organizations later considered overseas aid or community relations (including the American Jewish Committee)

activities” (AJYB 1950, p. 445). The categories are generally plausible and self-explanatory but some apparent anomalies reflect both the nature of Jewish life and the difficulty of fitting many organizations into few categories. The 1918 *AJYB* distinguished between religious and educational organizations but subsequent volumes lumped the two together. Either approach could be justified. Most often religious and educational organizations can readily be distinguished—congregations versus schools, for example. Yet religious activities and education are often so closely linked in Judaism—indeed, learning is a religious activity—that distinguishing between them may seem misguided. Beginning in 2000, a distinction was made between religious-educational organizations and schools-institutions. The *AJYB* does not spell out the rationale for creating a new category but schools-institutions seems to include mainly institutions of higher education, such as Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and the Jewish Theological Seminary, formerly considered religious-educational.

With so few categories, it has been difficult to decide where to place some organizations. The community relations category (called “civic defense, political”

in 1950 and “community relations, political” in 1960) provides a case in point. It includes the American Jewish Committee, Anti-Defamation League and National Community Relations Advisory Council (Table 3), which most knowledgeable members of the Jewish community would indeed think of as community relations organizations. Yet it also includes the American Council for Judaism, known primarily for being what Kolsky (1990, p. ix) calls “the only American Jewish organization ever formed for the specific purpose of fighting Zionism and opposing the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.” In addition, particular organizations are occasionally moved from one category to another, without explanation. B’nai B’rith, for example, was categorized as social, mutual benefit in 1950 but as social welfare beginning in 1960. We do not know what changed—the organization itself, or the implicit rules for categorization.

Nevertheless, it is useful to consider the changing distribution of organizations among categories. Since the first entry for each category (either 1918 or 1950), the numbers of community relations, cultural and Israel-related organizations have increased fairly steadily. Religious and educational organizations rose to a peak in 1970 and 1980 and then declined. And the number of organizations involved in overseas aid, social-mutual benefit and social welfare has gone down as well (social welfare mostly between 1918 and 1950, staying fairly constant thereafter). Because these trends have never been analyzed, we have no explanations for them. It is plausible that connections to Israel have increased as Israel’s increasing institutional complexity and prominence in world affairs provide more occasions for establishing links; that the growth of cultural organizations reflects creativity in the development

**Table 3** National Jewish organizations categorized by function, 1950

Type of organization	Examples
Civic defense, political	American Council for Judaism; AJC; ADL; Jewish Labor Committee; National Community Relations Advisory Council
Cultural	American Jewish Historical Society; Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists; Jewish Museum (New York); Jewish Publication Society of America; YIVO
Overseas aid	American Committee for Relief of Yemenite Jews; American Joint Distribution Committee; ORT; United Jewish Appeal
Religious, educational	Agudath Israel of America; B’nai B’rith Hillel Foundations; Central Conference of American Rabbis; Hebrew Union College; Mohel Association of the U.S.; National Federations of Temple Brotherhoods and Temple Sisterhoods
Social, mutual benefit	Alpha Epsilon Pi Fraternity; American Federation for Polish Jews; B’nai B’rith; Delta Phi Epsilon Sorority; Free Sons of Israel; Sephardic Jewish Brotherhood; Sigma Iota Zeta Veterinary Medical Fraternity; Workmen’s Circle
Social welfare	Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds; Jewish Consumptives’ Relief Society of Denver; National Council of Jewish Women; National Jewish Welfare Board
Zionist and Pro-Israel	American Friends of the Hebrew University; Hadassah; Hapoel Hamizrachi of America; Jewish Agency for Palestine, American Section; Jewish National Fund; Zionist Organization of America; Zionist-Revisionists of America

Source: *AJYB* 51 (1950, pp. 445–458)



of an indigenous American Jewish culture; that overseas aid has declined because Jewish communities outside of Israel have declined in size and importance; and that some social-mutual benefit and social welfare organizations disappeared as Jews have become more integrated into American society and become more prosperous. But these are guesses, nothing more.

Since 1970, the *AJYB* has cross-classified national organizations by demographic or target group—organizations for professionals, women and youth and college age (Table 4). The number of professional organizations has increased, while the number directed at youth and college students has decreased. This may reflect the changing occupational structure of the Jewish community (Burstein 2007), the low Jewish birthrate (affecting the number of Jews in college) and the level of the Jewish community's concerns about providing organized opportunities for young people.

## Contemporary Jewish Organizations: Data from the IRS

### Finding Jewish Organizations

We have little idea what Jewish organizational life looks like today but those who study Jewish organizations are hardly alone in this regard. There are a few lists of organizations within ethnic, racial, or religious communities [Funchion (1983) on Irish American organizations, Gonzales (1985) on Hispanic Americans, and LaPotin and Armand (1987) on Native Americans], a small number of studies of particular types of organizations within communities [e.g., Skocpol et al. (2000) on African American fraternal organizations] and a few studies of voluntary organizations in particular localities (e.g., Pichardo 1988–1990, Brettell 2005). But no studies try to describe comprehensively the organizations of ethnic, racial, or religious communities.

There is a good reason why there are no comprehensive organizational studies of such communities: data are extremely difficult to collect. Despite the importance of voluntary organizations in American history, it is difficult to obtain decent data on even the largest national organizations or on all the organizations in particular cities and towns [see the discussions in Gamm and Putnam (1999), Kaufman (1999), and Skocpol et al. (2000); but see Hammack (2002) for some creative ideas]. For recent times, “it has been hard, and in some parts of the [nonprofit] sector impossible, to answer even basic questions, such as how many nonprofit entities exist and at what rates they are going out of business or coming into being” (DiMaggio, Weiss, and

**Table 4** National Jewish Organizations Cross-referenced by Target Group

Organization by target group	1970	1980	1990	2000	2007
Professional	22	21	29	30	30
Women	19	17	16	15	16
Youth and college (1980, youth and student)	23	24	18	15	15

Clotfelter 2002, p. 1621; see also Gronbjerg 2002). For religious organizations other than congregations, data are very limited; according to Chaves (2002, p. 1525), “religious nonprofits are the subset of religious organizations for which the gap is greatest between what we need to know and what we currently have the data to figure out.”

This article describes a major part of Jewish organizational life—Jewish nonprofit organizations—by utilizing a data source never before used to study the organizations of a religious or ethnic group—the U.S. Internal Revenue Service’s list of 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organizations (the charitable and nonprofit organizations whose most familiar aspect is the deductibility of donations).

The IRS data base (U.S. Internal Revenue Service 2008) has several major virtues: it has been used in many studies of nonprofit organizations; it is more complete than other data sources; and it is associated with other data bases providing more information about each organization (Gronbjerg 2002, pp. 1747, 1752).

The IRS data base has weaknesses as well. Organizations with less than \$5,000 in revenue do not have to file; religious congregations may file but do not have to; the IRS is slow to remove defunct organizations from the data base; organizations nested within other organizations (such as religious schools within congregations or preschools within Jewish Community Centers) are not listed separately;<sup>2</sup> some organizations list branches or local chapters separately (for example, Chabad) but others do not (such as Hadassah); and new organizations are less likely to be included than older ones (Gronbjerg 2002; Lampkin and Boris 2002). The information available about each organization is minimal—basically just name and location. Organizations that are nonprofit but political (such as AIPAC) are not included; neither are profit-making enterprises (such as Judaica shops and bookstores).

On balance, given how little we know about Jewish organizational life, the strengths of the IRS data base far outweigh the weaknesses. The data used here were drawn from that data base, as it was on March 31, 2008.

The data base included just over 728,000 organizations. How to find the Jewish ones?—by carrying out a multi-stage keyword search using the IRS online search tool to find organizations with names flagging them as Jewish. The initial search used keywords commonly associated with Jewish organizations (e.g., Jewish, Hebrew, Torah, Israel) and produced 6,433 organizations. The second search used words found often in the names of the organizations discovered in the first search, other than the first set of keywords. This process was repeated—ultimately using almost 400 key words—until the eighth search added only .2% of the total number, 10,676 organizations. At that point it was quite certain that at least 99% of all 501(c)(3) organizations identifiable by name as apparently Jewish had been found.

The list was then examined to eliminate organizations that were not Jewish, despite their names. These included organizations with names marking them as obviously not Jewish (including words such as Christian, evangelical and Jesus) and

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<sup>2</sup> Beck (2002, p. i) states there are “over a thousand Jewish preschools throughout the country” but provides no source for her claim; there are very few preschools in the 501(c)(3) database.

Christian organizations with names including transliterated Hebrew words (such as Adat Adonai Congregation of the Lord and Beit Tziyon Messianic Assembly). Also excluded were hospitals (such as Beth Israel) that may have been seen as Jewish organizations at one time but not any more (Elazar 1995, p. 301) and family foundations with Jewish-sounding names (such as the Efraim and Judith Schwartz Foundation) but no declared tie to a Jewish community. Also eliminated were several organizations whose name included a Jewish key word embedded in a longer word, such as the House Rabbit Society (“rabbi” within “rabbit”). The total number of Jewish 501(c)(3) organizations was 9,482.

### Jewish Nonprofits, 2008

At this point it was necessary to categorize the organizations. But how? The *AJYB* functional categories could have been used, making comparisons between *AJYB* and IRS data possible and providing historical continuity. But there were three significant problems with doing so. First, some *AJYB* categories were problematic. Religious and educational organizations were first categorized separately, then combined; “schools, institutions” were all educational. “Israel-related” is not a functional category like the others but rather a geographical designation—Israel-related organizations could focus on education, religion, social welfare, etc.

Second, the *AJYB*’s decision to use few categories made it difficult to keep track of important types of organizations and adjust to changing circumstances. Federations, community centers, free loan societies and cemeteries/burial societies have been both numerous and important historically; a good argument can be made for creating categories for each. Using the original *AJYB* categories hides the rise of new types of organizations, including organizations focusing on the Holocaust.

Third and perhaps most important, the *AJYB* never explicitly stated rules for classifying organizations. Some organizations could plausibly fit multiple categories—free loan societies into mutual benefit and social welfare perhaps, burial societies into religious and mutual benefit—but how they were classified and why, was never spelled out. And as organizations change over time and new types of organizations are created, explicit rules for inclusion are needed so that the meaning of each category stays the same over time. Analyses of the rise and decline of particular categories mean nothing if the content of the categories changes.

Thus, 12 new categories were created and inclusion rules made explicit (the categories are described very briefly in Table 5): arts organizations, camps, Jewish community centers, ethnic organizations, federations, foundations, gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender organizations, health organizations, organizations focusing on the Holocaust and professional and recreational organizations. A few organizations did not fit any category, such as the American Israel Environmental Council and Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership; these were classified as “other.” The use of more categories may make analysis more difficult. But it is easy to combine categories, while it may be difficult or impossible to refine or subdivide existing categories without repeating the entire process of categorization with the original data.

**Table 5** Classification of Jewish nonprofit organizations, 501(c)(3) data

Function	Definition and criteria for organizations' inclusion
Arts	Centered around performance and creative arts
Camps	Camps and retreat centers
Cemetery	Primary function is providing funeral services. Keywords include chevra kedisha
Community center	Jewish Community Centers and other organizations that provide a wide range of activities for people of all ages and backgrounds
Community relations	Aimed at strengthening relationships with non-Jews, including interfaith organizations
Culture/heritage	Aimed at preserving Jewish culture and customs but not necessarily religion. Some keywords: culture, heritage, tradition, historic, secular, humanist
Educational	Schools or other organizations providing or supporting education
Ethnic	Devoted to maintaining in the U.S. the culture, heritage, or religious traditions of Jews from elsewhere, or to enabling such Jews to organize for a common purpose. Organizations devoted to supporting Jews outside the U.S. not included
Federation	Jewish federations
Foundation	Provide financial support to other organizations
Free loan	Provide interest-free loans to members of the Jewish community. Some keywords: free loan, gmach
Gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender (gibt)	Organizations for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Jews
Health	Health-related organizations (not including hospitals in the U.S.)
Holocaust	Focused on Holocaust remembrance
Housing	Provide shelter or housing to Jews
Other	Organizations for which information was available but not appropriate for other categories
Professional	Organizations for specific professions
Recreation	Sports and fitness
Religious	Synagogues, congregations and other organizations implementing Jewish law or traditions. Some keywords: synagogue, temple, cong (excluding humanist congregations and congress), shul, mikvah, reconstructionist, kashrut
Social welfare	Providing or promoting the provision of services helping poor, at-risk, or otherwise underprivileged Jews. Some keywords: service, family service, volunteer
Targeted by age	
Youth	Some keywords: youth, young, child, kid, camp, day school
Young adult	Some keywords: young adult, hillel (college campus organizations), campus
Elderly	Some keywords: aged, elder, ageing, aging, senior, nursing home, geriatric, retirement
Connected to other countries	
Israel	Organizations connected to Israel, including Zionist organizations and organizations promoting peace for Israel
Countries other than Israel	Organizations tied to a non-US country or geographical area other than Israel.

It did make sense to cross-classify organizations on bases other than function, as the *AJYB* had identified professional, women's and youth-and-college organizations separately. Organizations were cross-classified along three dimensions: by state, age group targeted and connection to Jews outside the U.S.

Organizations were initially classified on the basis of their names. When the name was uninformative or ambiguous—"Jewish councils" can be federations, social service agencies, or other types of organizations, for example—additional information was sought on the web. No information could be found for 1,322 organizations, which are classified as unknown.

Organizations were categorized in terms of one primary function to the extent possible. But 764 were classified as foundations and something else, usually the type of organization to which the foundation gave funds and 307 other organizations were attributed more than one function—4.6% of organizations with known functions not including foundations.

By far the most numerous are religious organizations—a category including not only congregations but also other organizations centered on implementing Jewish law or traditions, such as kashrut-certifying organizations and mikvahs (ritual baths) (Table 6). The second-most common type is educational. Together, religious and

**Table 6** Jewish 501(c)(3) organizations, 2008, by function

Function	Number	Per cent
Arts	86	.9
Camps	55	.6
Cemetery	122	1.3
Community center	212	2.2
Community relations	94	1.0
Culture/heritage	291	3.1
Educational	1892	20
Ethnic	145	1.5
Federation	240	2.5
Foundation	1438	15
Free loan	102	1.1
Gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender (glbt)	4	0
Health	167	1.8
Holocaust	112	1.2
Housing	228	2.4
Other	28	.3
Professional	64	.7
Recreation	18	.2
Religious	3495	37
Social welfare	438	4.6
Unknown	1322	14
Total organizations <sup>a</sup>	9482	

Source: [www.irs.gov/charities/article/0,,id=96136,00.html](http://www.irs.gov/charities/article/0,,id=96136,00.html)

<sup>a</sup> The total of the numbers in the column is 10,553 because 1,071 organizations were attributed two functions; see the text for a discussion

educational organizations total 57% of the Jewish nonprofits registered with the IRS.

Wasn't this completely predictable? Not necessarily. In the *AJYB* list for 2007 (Table 2), religious and educational organizations together make up just 17% of the total. Linfield's (1930, p. 21) 1927 survey, using roughly similar categories, also found that 57% of Jewish organizations were religious or educational but it was educational organizations that were the most common—35% of the 13,897 organizations—with congregations next at 22%.

The number of religious organizations, 3,495, is similar to the number of synagogues in 2000, 3,727 (Table 1) but synagogues (along with churches, mosques, etc.) are not required to register and many of the religious organizations are not synagogues. To understand the numbers, we need to know more about why some synagogues register and others do not; the Union for Reform Judaism requires that its congregations register, but we do not know the policies of other groups. It is also worth pointing out that Chabad organizations, which were tabulated separately because they were so numerous, constitute 13%—457 out of 3,495—of the religious organizations.

There are many foundations as well but then there is a big drop-off, with culture/heritage organizations constituting 3.1% of the total, federations 2.5%, housing 2.4% and smaller numbers for the rest. It is interesting that freestanding burial societies and free loan associations, probably unknown to most contemporary Jews and associated for most of the others with an earlier period in American Jewish life, are still fairly common, roughly as numerous as Holocaust-related organizations. (It should be noted, as mentioned above, that the findings are affected by organizations' own approaches to reporting; the local branches or chapters of some national organizations report separately, while others do not.) The 145 ethnic organizations aim to maintain the culture, heritage and religious traditions of Jews who came to the U.S. from Afghanistan, Bukhara, the Caucasus, Cuba, Georgia, the Iberian Peninsula, Iran, Latvia, Morocco, Poland, Russia, Yemen and other countries.

The geographical distribution of the organizations is not surprising. The ten states with the largest Jewish populations—New York, California, Florida, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Massachusetts, Maryland, Ohio and Texas—also have the greatest number of religious and educational organizations. But the organizations are more concentrated than the population. The top ten states have 82% of the Jewish population but 85% of the religious organizations and 89% of the educational organizations. More striking is the continuing dominance of New York in Jewish organizational life. Though New York State is down to 25% of the American Jewish population (with California not far behind at 19), it is home to almost half the religious and 55% of the educational organizations. Part of this predominance is no doubt due to organizational inertia—organizations often perpetuate themselves long after much of their population base has disappeared—but much of it probably reflects a link between population density and organization-building.

It is sometimes said that the Jewish community is not especially good at reaching out to young adults and the data support such a claim. There are 742 organizations

targeted to specific age groups—youth, young adult and the elderly—and of these only 6% are targeted to young adults, mostly on college campuses (Table 7). Of course, there are many programs for young adults operating within organizations (such as synagogues) where they are not identified separately, but that is true for the youth and the elderly as well.

Organizations directed at youth are primarily educational, which is not surprising; those directed at the elderly most often provide housing. Many of those directed at young adults are educational as well but substantial proportions focus on Jewish culture and heritage and on Judaism.

Among the *AJYB*'s national organizations, the largest number are Israel-related but among the 501(c)(3) organizations they comprise just 4% of the total (Table 8). A high proportion are foundations, often devoted to supporting specific organizations in Israel, including universities, yeshivas, arts and scientific organizations and social service and social welfare agencies; examples are American Friends of the Israel Museum, American Friends of Magen David Adom, American Friends of Ohel Sarah and the Israel Cancer Research Fund.

Not tabulated in other work on Jewish organizations are those targeted at Jewish life in countries other than Israel. There are 272 such organizations, 3% of the total and they support Jews and Jewish life in many other countries, including Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Georgia, Lithuania and Slovakia; the IRS list includes Chabad organizations (headquartered in the U.S.) active in countries from Argentina to Uzbekistan as well. The greatest proportion of these organizations is devoted to preserving the culture and heritage of the Jewish communities in those countries, with a great many supporting Jewish religious life.

**Table 7** Jewish organizations targeted to age groups

	Youth	Young adult	Elderly
Number of organizations	477	46	219
Percent <sup>a</sup>			
Camp	10	0	0
Community center	0	2	0
Culture/heritage	0	41	0
Educational	63	37	1
Ethnic	1	0	1
Foundation	12	11	19
Health	0	0	15
Housing	2	0	74
Professional	0	2	0
Religious	4	26	2
Social welfare	13	11	12

None of the following types of organizations were targeted specifically to age groups: arts, cemetery, community, federation, free loan, GLBT, Holocaust, Other, Recreation

<sup>a</sup> Percentages add up to more than 100 because 30 organizations targeted at youth had more than one function, as did 14 directed at young adults and 55 directed at the elderly

**Table 8** U.S. Jewish organizations linked to Israel and other countries

	Israel	Other countries
Number	404	272
Per cent <sup>a</sup>		
Arts	3	1
Cemetery	0	1
Community center	0	2
Community relations	4	2
Culture/heritage	4	9
Educational	18	12
Ethnic	0	53
Federation	0	2
Foundation	43	23
Health	8	1
Holocaust	1	1
Housing	2	1
Other	1	1
Professional	1	0
Recreation	2	0
Religious	5	34
Social welfare	9	6

None of the following types of organizations were linked to Israel or other countries: camp, free loan, GLBT

<sup>a</sup> Percentages add up to more than 100 because 13 organizations linked to Israel had more than one function, as did 192 (mostly ethnic) linked to other countries

## Conclusions

It is impossible to understand the American Jewish community without understanding how it is organized. Scholars have long appreciated the importance of studying particular Jewish organizations but seemingly no one but Daniel Elazar has made a serious attempt to describe the overall organizational structure of the Jewish community. This article attempts to highlight the importance of doing so and to show what we can learn from some past, relatively unknown, work and from data not previously used to study Jewish organizations.

This unprecedented survey of historical data on Jewish organizations and contemporary Jewish nonprofits is necessarily very preliminary. Nevertheless, the data enable us to track significant changes in American Jewish life and describe key aspects of current circumstances. The number of synagogues rose from an official count of 37 in 1850 to a high close to 4,000 in 1990, with, possibly, a small decline since then. The *American Jewish Year Book's* annual survey of organizations, continuing for over a hundred years, shows national Jewish organizations reflecting changes in Jewish life in the U.S. and around the world. The assimilation and economic success of American Jews was associated with a decline in the mutual-benefit organizations that were so significant a part of American life; the destruction of European Jewish communities and the movement of so many Jews to Israel was associated with a decline in the number of organizations devoted to helping poor Jews overseas, while the rise of Zionism and the development and growth of the



State of Israel led to a great expansion in the number of Zionist and Israel-related organizations.

Contemporary data show how some of these trends manifest themselves today, in more detail. The hundreds of organizations linking American Jews to Israel reflect not only the strength of ties between the two Jewish populations but also how Israel has grown and modernized—as Israeli society grows more complex, the set of American organizations becomes more complex as well, supporting an increasingly diverse set of Israeli organizations. As American Jewish life has become more complex organizationally, the longstanding *AJYB* classification of organizations has become inadequate and a new classification scheme must be developed to make it possible to portray the complexity.

The IRS data show continuities in Jewish life—religious and educational organizations dominate Jewish organizational life—and are also consistent with concerns about Jewish continuity—very few organizations are targeted at young adults relative to the number targeted at children and the elderly. Some of the findings may surprise no one but others draw attention to aspects of Jewish life not often discussed—the persisting importance of subgroups within the Jewish community devoted to sustaining the culture of Jews from around the world, for example.

The data provide a glimpse of the complexity, richness and dynamism of American Jewish life and a hint of what we can learn by studying the overall organizational structure of the American Jewish community. But the data also raise many questions and highlight how little we know. Three types of follow-up research are likely to be especially useful. Proceeding with each will necessarily involve addressing many methodological as well as substantive issues. It will be necessary to evaluate each data source, determine how readily data from different sources may be combined to increase the comprehensiveness of our descriptions of Jewish organizational life, highlight how substantive conclusions depend on data availability and quality and point out what additional data are needed.

The first type of research would aim at providing a comprehensive description of contemporary Jewish organizations. Such research would have to be both broader and deeper than that described above. For breadth, it would have to add types of organizations not included above, particularly for-profit organizations and nonprofit organizations that are not 501(c)(3)s. It would have to include all synagogues and local branches of national organizations. It would be important to find organizations too small or new to have registered with the IRS. And, ideally, the research would identify [as Linfield (1930) did to a limited extent] sub-organizations nested within organizations, such as religious schools within congregations, preschools within congregations and Jewish community centers, educational organizations within federations, sports organizations within community centers and so on. It would be interesting to see where the lists of organizations published annually in the *AJYB* fit into the wider picture.

Such descriptive research should also include much more information about each organization, including, where possible, information about finances, number of members and range of activities. Quite a bit of information is available about 501(c)(3) organizations in the IRS form 990s, filed by those with annual revenues of

over \$25,000. Considerable effort has been devoted in recent years to improving the accuracy of the forms and making them available to the public (Lampkin and Boris 2002), particularly through the National Center for Charitable Statistics at the Urban Institute (<http://nccs.urban.org/>). A great deal could be learned from this resource, unexploited in the study of Jewish organizations but finding information about other types of organizations would be a considerable challenge.

The second type of follow-up research would add a historical dimension to the first type. Anyone interested in a comprehensive picture of Jewish life in the U.S. wants to know how the community has changed. From an organizational perspective, we want to know how the numbers of organizations have changed over time as the Jewish population has grown and dispersed geographically; how the types of organizations have changed as the circumstances and interests of Jews have changed; and how the changing attitudes and practices of individual Jews, well-described in decades worth of surveys, are expressed organizationally.

Of course, the farther back in time research goes, the less information there will be about most organizations and about many of those that disappeared there may be no information at all. But it seems essential both to search widely for information and to temper accounts of Jewish organizational history with analyses of how the loss of data over time affects our conclusions.

The third type of research would go beyond description and put the study of Jewish organizations in a broader theoretical context. Much research has been done on the forces affecting the creation, growth and decline of organizations (e.g., Amburgey and Rao 1996; Hannan et al. 2003; Romanelli 1991; Singh and Lumsden 1990) and some of this has been used in studying religious and ethnic organizations (e.g., Finke 1989; Iannaccone et al. 1995; Minkoff 1995; Olzak and West 1991). Changes in the number, type and size of organizations depend on their internal characteristics (such as the rules they impose on members), the environments they face (including competition from other organizations, population size and mobility and legal constraints) and leaders' decisions.

Applied to the study of Jewish organizations, this work on organizations could help us understand why some types of Jewish organizations grow as others decline, how differences between the late 19th century and late 20th century Jewish communities affected their response to mass immigration from Eastern Europe, the sources of growth and creativity in Jewish organizational life and the impact on Jewish organizational life of competition among Jewish organizations and between Jewish and non-Jewish organizations. Work on religious organizations finds repeatedly that strict denominations have tended to grow and more liberal denominations to decline in the U.S. for two hundred years (e.g., Iannaccone 1994); whether this work is contradicted by the growth of the Reform movement in the U.S., or predicts the movement's decline, will be a good question to consider.

It would be fair to say that those who study Jewish organizations and the American Jewish community have barely taken a first step on what would be a very long journey. If we wish to understand the American Jewish community and the forces likely to affect its future, however, it is a journey we must begin. And if we succeed in learning about Jewish organizational life, the lessons learned could be used to advance the study of other religious and ethnic groups in the U.S., thereby

contributing to our understanding of groups and organizations fundamental to the structure of American life.

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