



## Two General Assembly Perspectives

### Wendy Paler and Jacob Labendz

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I came to the GA with very few expectations, having no idea what it would be like and not quite sure how the proceedings would relate to my own personal and professional interests. I am currently a PhD candidate in the history department of Washington University, concentrating on modern European Jewry. Despite holding quite strong views about Jewish life in America, I do not spend much time engaging formally in this domain outside of interactions with my Wexner cohort.

The opening plenary made a strong impression on me, and, I must admit, a somewhat negative one. I was encouraged to hear Federation leaders openly embrace the challenges that we collectively face and acknowledge that people and organizations outside of the traditional Jewish community have developed extremely compelling strategies for confronting them. The main issues include the declining relevance of the federation structure to American Jewish life, as well as the drastic – though, I would say, positive – changes in the ways that young Jews construct their identities and relate to their own communities, Israel and Jewish history. What disappointed me was that the opening speeches were followed and interspersed with quite traditional, and I would say, regressive strategies for moving forward.

A great number of young American Jews struggle with Israel, and the Holocaust no longer suffices as a reason for us to remain Jewish. We grew up without having to justify our national allegiances, whatever they may be. Why then did we half-heartedly sing national anthems? Why acknowledge that young Jews are identifying and connecting differently with Judaism and Israel – even praise them for it, then offer Birthright as a solution to bring them back to proper consciousness? Just because it “works” does not mean that it addresses core issues or values. Worst of all, why invite the Israeli Ambassador to provide the keynote address at a conference about American Jewry and then applaud as he mythologized and theologized revisionist history? Have we no leaders and thinkers worth listening to at home?

Thinking back on the GA, it would be easy for me to rail against the frequent misuse of terms and recourses to nationalist history or the emptiness of concepts like, “innovation,” “continuity,” and “peoplehood.” However, what I saw was deeply moving... I saw two-thousand individuals of all ages coming together because we care deeply about being Jewish and making it compelling and rewarding for others to join us in it. I saw two-thousand professionals and lay leaders striving for best practices, looking beyond their quotidian purviews, questioning their longstanding assumptions about Judaism, and embracing optimism. For someone like me, who came of age when the 1991 Jewish Population Survey was released, who spent his formative years being threatened that dating non-Jews would “finish Hitler’s work,” I found this optimism and openness to change encouraging. Though I share minor



trepidation with some of my colleagues about the professionalization of Judaism, I think that it does far more good than harm, and that it will continue to do so, provided that it becomes an increasingly diffuse field.

And so, I will end where I began, with the opening plenary, and pose a question. Why not embrace the spirit of openness and optimism that I sensed at the GA at our most formal and holy hour? Must our outward face remain the same, despite a new logo, when we strive so hard for internal change? Our major funders will follow us if we lead. Young innovators will join us, if provided an opportunity to transform us. Our big tent is broken, because in an age of comfort, our internal battle lines have become our primary battle lines. It is no longer possible to speak apolitically in an American Jewish setting, if it ever was. This offers us an opportunity to introduce even greater frankness and openness into the public sphere. If we do not, the conversations will be carried out elsewhere and without the practical benefits of a united and professionalized community.

In sum, I was deeply impressed by much of the GA. There is readiness to consider new ideas and willingness to transition. Yet, I also sensed misplaced apprehension. I know it is misplaced because I attended the conference with my Wexner colleagues. Many of them are burgeoning leaders in redefining American Jewish life. There is nothing to be feared and everything to be gained.