

ELIE KAUNFER

Faith vs. Faithfulness in American Jewish Institutions

The case for a ‘surge investment’ strategy



AMERICANS’ faith in their institutions has famously been on the decline since the Watergate era. Given the presidential scandal of that time, one might not be surprised that average confidence in major American institutions at the end of the 1970s stood at 48 percent. But according to a 2023 Gallup poll, we have that period beat by a longshot: 26 percent, an all-time low. These institutions include Congress, the presidency, the Supreme Court, the police, public schools, and the media.

What tops the chart for confidence in the list of 15 categories measured? Small businesses (65 percent). Apparently, Americans much prefer a decentralized, community-based institution over large banks (26 percent) or “big business” (14 percent).

This trend is playing out in the American Jewish world as well. It was clear even by the year 2000 that American Jews were less connected to Jewish institutions than in previous generations, a trend that's only continued. Pew's 2020 study of American Jews showed that only about a third were synagogue members; more than half reported that they seldom or never go to synagogue, and another 27 percent said they go only a few times a year. The number of Jews donating money to Jewish Federations has shrunk significantly in the past 30 years.

What do Jews prefer instead of synagogues and rabbis? According to Pew: home-based rituals such as a Passover seder (62 percent) or marking Shabbat "in a personally meaningful way" (39 percent). Think of this as the "small business" alternative to "big business" synagogues and Federations.

If Jewish faith in these core Jewish institutions has declined so drastically, why do they persist? While there is a financial element in some cases (substantial assets like buildings or endowments make going out of business very complicated), there's a larger issue at play: "Faith" as we commonly understand it is not the right measure of institutions' ability to last. After all, 52 percent of voting-age Americans still vote in congressional elections, despite the fact that only 8 percent say they have faith in Congress. Americans may not have faith in public schools or the police, but they still overwhelmingly use their services. They might tell pollsters that they question the effectiveness of city government, but that doesn't stop them from putting out their trash on Tuesdays.

The disconnect here comes down to different conceptions of faith. In Hebrew, the word for faith is *emunah*, from the same root as the word *amen*. This is often translated as "faith" or "belief," as in: "I believe in the existence of God," or "I believe this claim to be true." But as Menachem Kellner, among others, has explained, this is not

what the term means. It does not connote the kind of “propositional” belief one has in mind when answering the survey question “Do you believe *x*?” Rather, it refers to a more practical meaning: reliable. In the daily Amidah prayer, we call God *ne’eman* (faithful). This doesn’t mean that God has faith, or that God is believable. It means that God is reliable, can be counted on, is rock solid.

Consider the medical system, one of the institutions measured by Gallup. Only 34 percent of us have much confidence in it. Like most of us, I’d rather stay healthy on my own, if I can. But if I get sick, I know it is there. I don’t think too much about it when I don’t need it; but when I do, I use the system. Like most people who enter the medical system, usually I get better and move on with my life. This is true even though I know that there are many other people whom the system does not serve well, at all, or affordably and that it too seldom fosters a healthy nation. My answer to a survey question about faith in the medical system would probably employ the more propositional definition of faith than the one at play in my life.

So, too, the Jewish institutional world. Most Jews, it seems, would prefer to celebrate their religion on their own or with their family. But when they need to interact with the system — asking a rabbi to bury their loved one, getting married, or joining a synagogue for a bar mitzvah — they know it is there, waiting for them. Most of the time, the system works well enough. Indeed, ATRA’s 2023 research into young American Jews’ relationships with rabbis shows that when people finally interact with a rabbi, most have a positive experience.

In moments of existential crisis, the value of this reliability is heightened. It is true that Jews have been giving less to the Federation system over time and that observers have long criticized its inefficiency. But in just a few months following October 7, the Jewish Federations of North America and local affiliates raised more than \$750 million — and gained 30,000 donors in New York alone. Peo-

ple wanted to give, and the Federation system was there — waiting, ready, reliable.

But we need to ask ourselves: Is this kind of passive, reactive relationship to the institutional world an optimal dynamic for Jewish thriving? For most Jews, these major institutions languish — reliably — in the background of their lives. How much better might Jewish life be in America if, instead, our institutions shined? If they worked efficiently, effectively, and inspirationally?



If you work long enough in the Jewish communal world, you'll hear Jewish leaders fantasize about completely reorganizing the system. All the mediocrity endemic to large institutions would disappear, and many more people would engage in Jewish communal life with more enthusiasm. This is the opposite of stability and reliability — it is a call for radical change.

And therein lies its shortcoming. In its fervor, the call for radical change fails to acknowledge the value of institutional reliability. Consider, if you will, the model of significant improvement rather than replacement. The goal is not to tear something to the ground, but rather to make improvements to a system that tends toward stagnation or erosion when left unchallenged. In this view, alternatives to the system are not meant to replace the system, but to offer different paths and, in so doing, to upgrade the status quo, strengthening the faithful elements of the system in the process. It is an attempt to lift all boats with a rising tide.

The independent-minyan movement provides an excellent example. When more than 60 independent minyanim launched in the early 2000s, led by educated volunteers rather than by ordained rabbis, meeting in people's living rooms rather than in official religious build-

ings, some predicted the end of synagogues. This faulty narrative presumed that new institutions always arise to replace old ones, rather than to influence and pressure the system as a whole. No minyan put any synagogue out of business. Instead, 20 years later, the two models operate in tandem. Synagogue rabbis who were originally threatened by the minyanim came to see them as places of experimentation and drew some—but certainly not all—of their innovations into synagogue life. If your (Ashkenazi) synagogue now has a prayer leader stationed in the middle of the sanctuary, leading the congregation in participatory singing, chances are it's because of the influence of independent minyanim.

Sometimes the best way to reform the institutional world is to build models outside it. These initiatives are not meant to overtake, but rather to coexist—and ultimately inspire—the mainstream.

The problem with this model of change is that it rarely goes far enough. New options arise and generate interest, but they are low-powered and remain marginal: Their ultimate impact is muted. How might we turn up the volume of the start-ups' influence on Jewish institutions? This demands a new approach to Jewish philanthropy—a “surge investing” approach. When useful alternatives to the mainstream emerge, donors should pour money into them, on the theory that only a well-capitalized alternative framework can put sufficient pressure on mainstream institutions to force them to change.

The Jewish philanthropic sector itself is actually an illustration of this approach. While, a generation ago, Jewish philanthropy was led by Federations, today it is led by private Jewish foundations. Federations still exist—indeed they remain among the most reliable forces in American Jewish life—but the rise of significant foundations have put pressure on many of the Federations, forcing them to sharpen their efforts. Foundations reduced the monopoly that Federations had on philanthropic power in communities, opening

up new areas of investment. Over time, the giving power of this sector has eclipsed that of Federations, without making Federations any less reliable, particularly in times of crisis. Judged by their total assets, foundations are not just a sideshow to the mainstream; they are an equal player, performing different functions in a diverse ecosystem. One could argue that Federations have upped their game in response to these foundations.

Imagine if this dynamic also played out more broadly in the non-profit arena. So often over the past 20 years, nonprofit start-ups, the alternatives to legacy Jewish institutions, win foundation money, but not enough to grow into organizations that can materially affect the communal status quo.

Perhaps this is because they seem risky; who knows if they will last? But on the flip side: What if they're never given the chance to make real change? As Cecilia Conrad, a leader in the "big-bet philanthropy" movement, recently wrote: "The size of philanthropic gifts should be guided not by the size of the organization's current budget, but rather, the size of the challenge it is positioned to address." What if the philanthropic investment strategy was to match the budgets of the institutions they are trying to affect, rather than simply nipping at their heels? Then we might be able to build the kind of communal ecosystem we really need, full of inspiring, effective institutions — not simply ones that continue to exist.

Mainstream American Jewish institutions are not going away; they are too valuable and too reliable. But they can — and they must — change. Perhaps our question should not be whether American Jews are losing faith in institutions, but rather whether those of us in positions of communal power will dare to dream big about how to change institutional life altogether. Not through revolutionary change and radical overhauls, but through investing in the incremental change offered by new institutions that are already in the landscape, making

some waves on the sides. A serious “surge investment” strategy could become a major lever of change, improving the Jewish institutional landscape to help it meet the unprecedented moment we are in. Let’s not continue to settle for reliable old standards that simply do the job for a shrinking audience, or only at moments of crisis. Let’s build institutions that inspire real faith in the Jewish future. *