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HEADLINE: NORTH AMERICAN JEWISH FEDERATIONS DECIDE TO FOCUS ON TRADITION

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HIGHLIGHT:

NEW YORK - The Council of Jewish Federations, representing more than 100 federations and major Jewish organizations across the United States and Canada, wrapped up its annual general assembly here last week. Its key resolution was a pledge to reinvigorate the Jewish identity of the American Jewish community by focusing on the traditions of Judaism.

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American Jewish leaders have been talking for years about the need to strengthen Jewish identity in this relentlessly pluralist, mobile society.

What was different about this general assembly, however, was that instead of focusing attention on tightening the political, social, and economic bonds between Israel and American Jewry, there was a marked turning-inward, an attempt to revitalize Jewish values on the individual scale.

"We have proven we can speak collectively with success on issues of international concern," **Shoshana Cardin**, chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, told 3,000 Jewish leaders, activists, rabbis, and students packed into a ballroom at New York's Hilton Hotel. "Today we are going to redirect our focus and continental commitment internally, to the issue of Jewish identity."

The alarming statistics concerning intermarriage and assimilation within the American Jewish community, released in the 1990 CJF National Population Survey, were a driving force behind this year's assembly.

For the first time, it devoted an entire day to a single topic: how to rebuild vital Jewish communities in North America, at a time when Israel is no longer a central issue for most young Jewish Americans.

Cardin reminded the assembled delegates of the 1969 CJF national assembly, when a group of college students took the podium and challenged the leadership of UJA-Federation to make a serious commitment to create a viable Jewish life in America. A task force was quickly convened, which came up with a program that required a commitment of \$100 million from local federations.

What, Cardin asked, was the federations' response? "The federations responded, 'Not now,'" Cardin recalled.

"Jewish education" was the key phrase during this general assembly, and Cardin and other leaders promised increased funding for educational projects. This was the same message participants heard from President Chaim Herzog and Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

Stanford University professor of religion Arnold Eisen said the next generation of American Jews is not going to remain within the Jewish community on the basis of an eroding attachment to the State of Israel and fading memories of the Holocaust.

Jewish education, an exploration of Jewish sources, and a "lifelong wrestling with God" are what makes the Jewish people unique, Eisen said, and only by returning to this core will American Jewry be viable.

Speaker after speaker rose to the podium with the same message: real Jewish education is based on Jewish tradition. For the first time at a non-denominational national meeting, all 3,000 participants were sent off Thursday morning for two hours of Tora study in small groups.

The subject was Deuteronomy, chapter Nitzavim, where the Jewish people are assembled at Sinai to receive the Tora. That portion was not chosen by accident.

"We must communicate to our children that we have a special mission as Jews," Cardin proclaimed. "That mission and that promise is the covenant."

Cardin suggested that the federation view Jewish renewal and continuity as it does any other fundraising campaign and invited each participant to sign a "Jewish identity pledge card" promising to read Jewish sources.

During a two-hour session on Israel-Diaspora relations Thursday afternoon, several hundred participants discussed the changing nature of Israel's role in world Jewry.

Martin Kraar, CJF executive vice president, noted that in 10 to 15 years Israel will become the world's largest Jewish community. "That brings new responsibility," he remarked. "The American Jewish community will only be the second largest in the world. We Americans will have to learn to deal with that ... Both Israel and the Diaspora must change," he said.

Discussion of aliya was muted at this CJF conference. In a 112-page program brochure, just one hour-long session, during Friday lunch, was devoted to aliya from North America.

Many speakers, however, stressed the importance of every North American Jew visiting Israel for extended periods of time.

Dr. Deborah Lipstadt of Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, a featured speaker on Israel-Diaspora relations, suggested that a major federation such as New York should give a chit to every Jewish youth graduating from high school. That chit would be good for six months of work or study in Israel, paid for by the local federation, and could be redeemed at any time over the next six years.

That kind of practical investment in the next generation of American Jews would yield a more committed American Jewry with a tangible connection to Israel, said Lipstadt.