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JUDAISM AND URBANISM: JEWISH COMMUNITIES REACT TO SUBURBANIZATION

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This speech is about the relationship between Judaism and suburban sprawl. In particular, Its about two issues: (1) should Jews care about suburban sprawl? And (2) how have Jewish communities coped with sprawl?

First of all, I would like to define sprawl. Then I will show how, from a Jewish point of view, sprawl has some negative side effects.

By sprawl, I mean a combination of two issues: first, the movement of population from city to suburb; for example, the city of St. Louis has lost about 2/3 of its 1950 population. Second, the low-density, automobile-dependent nature of those suburbs.

In this speech, I would suggest that sprawl is problematic as to both Jewish values and Jewish observance. First let's talk about Jewish values- in particular, charity and environmental protection.

In Judaism, support of the poor is not optional. The book of Leviticus states: "You shall not glean your vineyard, neither shalt thou gather the fallen fruit of the vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and the stranger." Later Jewish law makes it clear that such obligations are not voluntary. In the 12th c., Moses ben Maimon (aka Maimonides), a leading codifier of Jewish law, wrote that the duty to give charity is actually enforceable in rabbinic courts. He also specified the proper methods of charity, writing that the highest level of charity is giving someone a job so that he can support himself.

But sprawl exacerbates inequalities. In the 1940s, most urban jobs were accessible on foot or by public transit. But government policy changed this: in the 20th c., government funneled tens of billions of dollars every year into highway construction, and now exceeds \$100b at all levels of govt. Such highway spending initially generated suburban residential development, by making it easier for commuters to drive from suburbs to downtown.

Eventually, jobs followed commuters, because bosses wanted their companies to be near their homes and near their customers. As a result, most jobs are in suburbs. And because govt. spending on highways was not matched by an equally extensive investment in public transit, many of those jobs have minimal or nonexistent access by public transit. For example, a recent Brookings Institution study showed that the typical metropolitan resident can reach about 30 percent of jobs in their metropolitan area via transit in 90 minutes.

What does this have to do with Maimonides? Everything. Because of sprawl and inadequate public transit, people too poor or disabled to drive can no longer reach jobs. In turn, this means that they must rely on public or private social welfare programs rather than being self-sufficient – thus creating a situation that is exactly the opposite of what Maimonides recommends., Sprawl makes poor people less self-sufficient by keeping them away from jobs. (Or alternatively, impoverishes them by forcing them to spend money on cars).

Now I'd like to talk about Jewish environmental values. Judaism disfavors both pollution and the expansion of urban land into the countryside, both of which are results of

sprawl. The Torah mandates an uncultivated green belt around land dominated by the Levite tribe. According to 19th c. rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, this law is designed to prevent cities from being cut off from agriculture.

Although the Torah does not directly address pollution, later Jewish tradition does. For example, the Talmud, a code of Jewish law written around the 5th c., prohibits tanneries and furnaces (then considered smelly, polluting activities) from being close to a city. Jewish law also creates limits on more urban activities: for example, an oven located on the 2nd floor of a building must be placed upon plaster so that any fire caused by the oven will not spread downstairs.

By contrast, sprawl means that large scale development expands into the countryside, and increases pollution as well. When people move to suburbs where everyone has to have a car to get around, they of course drive more. Each mile driven creates more pollution. The correlation between auto traffic and pollution was demonstrated during the 1996 Olympics; when the city encouraged Atlanta motorists to drive less. As traffic on Atl roads fell by 23 percent, emergency room visits related to asthma dropped by 42 percent! And of course, all those cars increase greenhouse emissions as well. A recent study by Harvard economics professor Edward Glaeser shows that the most transit-oriented big cities emit the fewest greenhouse gases, and that they also emit fewer GHGs than their suburbs.

What about sprawl and Jewish observance? The Torah prohibits work and kindling a fire on the Sabbath (from Friday at sundown to a little after sundown Saturday) For a variety of reasons, traditional Jews interpret this rule to prohibit driving on the Sabbath. First, auto engines burn gasoline, which is arguably setting a fire. Second, the need to fuel and maintain a car creates a risk of other independent violations. For example, drivers may need to carry money for gas, and Jewish law prohibits carrying money on the Sabbath. And if a car breaks down, the owner must repair it, creating an independent Sabbath violation.

But in American suburbia, walking to synagogue (or anyplace else) is often quite difficult, for three reasons. Many suburbs are so thinly populated that only a few dozen houses are really within walking distance. Many suburban neighborhoods have just one or two houses per acre. In such a neighborhood, very few people will live within real walking distance of a synagogue, and unless the area is heavily Jewish most of them won't be Jewish anyhow.

Second, even in higher density areas walking is often difficult or dangerous due to antipedestrian street design. For example, I lived in Jacksonville Florida from 2006 to 2011. In Jacksonville, most of the community's synagogues were on or near San Jose Blvd., a major road. San Jose is 8 lanes wide in some spots- not exactly a walkable place, because such wide streets encourage fast traffic that is dangerous for pedestrians. And buildings are often placed behind huge parking lots, which means that even the pedestrian who survives the 8 lane street has to fight cars while walking through the parking lot.

Third, in residential areas streets are often dead-end (or cul-de-sac) streets instead of being on a grid. Because such streets do not connect with each other, residents of such

streets often cannot walk to one residential street to another without walking on the aforementioned 8 lane roads.

As a result of all these things, it is sometimes difficult for Jewish suburbanites to walk to a synagogue- or for that matter anything else. Thus, the relationship between Jewish law and sprawl is a dicey one.

So what can we do about it? First, in our role as political actors, I would like to point out that sprawl is not just a result of immutable consumer preferences, but in fact is caused by government policy in a variety of ways:

- *Govt highway spending helps people move to suburbs

- *Low density subdivisions exist because zoning laws artificially limit density. In addition, minimum parking requirements artificially limit density because every foot used for parking can't be used for housing, and make walking uncomfortable because if pedestrians have to cross parking lots they have longer commutes and less comfortable commutes.

- *Streets are wide because municipal planners like them that way, and comprehensive plans often provide for very wide streets.

- *Cul-de-sac streets were encouraged by the federal govt back in the 1930s, when the FHA started guaranteeing home mortgages. The FHA tended to require low densities, wide streets and cul de sacs.

Remove the govt policy, and you remove the sprawl- or at least, you limit the amount of new sprawl, and make it more pedestrian-friendly.

So at the state and federal level, you should urge your legislators to support public transit, to mitigate the negative effects of sprawl. At the local level, support rezoning that increases density and brings more development to walkable areas, rather than trying to prevent new stuff from being built. In addition, I'd like to recommend a few organizations: What can we do about these policies? I'd like to recommend a couple of organizations - CNU (cnu.org) and Smart Growth America (smartgrowthamerica.org) to point you in the right direction.

In our roles as individual Jews, we should support shuls in walkable (preferably urban) neighborhoods, and try to make our existing shuls more walkable- for example, by putting parking in back of a building rather than in front.

How have we been doing? Better in some regions, worse in others.

At one extreme is New York City: most of the city's neighborhoods have at least a synagogue within walking distance, and some (like the Upper West Side and Flatbush) have every manner of Jewish-oriented facilities, even Jewish day schools and yeshivas. Even suburban Jewish communities such as Teaneck have lots of buses and sidewalks on most blocks.

At the other extreme lies Kansas City. There is only one synagogue within the city limits of KC- a Reform synagogue that meets only on Friday nights, and doesn't even have a Saturday service. (There's also a Chabad House that started fairly recently, but its not yet capable of supporting minyans). Worse still, all of the suburban synagogues are in

Overland Park, Kansas, a place where the only buses stop running around 5 pm and don't run on weekends. So when I visited KC for a conference, I wound up spending shabbos alone (the Chabad House wasn't open, and I couldn't spend shabbos in Overland Park unless I wanted to rent a car or cab to get back downtown after shabbos). By my criteria, Kansas City gets an F

In between those extremes lie a wide range of communities. Just slightly below NYC is Philadelphia, where the downtown has 9 or 10 synagogues, and there are commuter-train suburbs like Bala Cynwd and Overbrook with large Jewish communities. The only thing that downtown Philadelphia is missing is Jewish day schools. On an urbanism scale Philadelphia gets an A-.

Just slightly below Philadelphia is Washington, DC, where there is one full service synagogue within walking distance of downtown (Keshet Israel), two or three smaller minyanim, and numerous synagogues on subway lines, both within the District of Columbia and in its inner suburbs. DC gets a B+

A rung below DC lies places with a minimal downtown Jewish presence, but with Jewish communities in walkable urban neighborhoods a few miles away. For example, Pittsburgh has only one synagogue downtown, but its major Jewish area, Squirrel Hill, is about a 20 minute bus ride away. So maybe Pittsburgh also gets a B. Similarly, Chicago has only one or two small downtown synagogues, but a couple of bigger ones near Wrigley Field a few miles away and a big Jewish community in West Rogers Park at the edge of the city.

At the lower end, there are places with no Jewish life in the most urban areas, but with Jewish communities either in neighborhoods like Squirrel Hill or in walkable, transit-friendly inner ring suburbs. For example, Atlanta's core is pretty Judenfrei, but Midtown and Buckhead a few miles away have a few synagogues, and its Orthodox core, Toco Hills, is about six miles out and served by numerous bus routes. Similarly, Cleveland has no urban Jewish life to speak of, but inner ring suburbs such as Cleveland Heights are well-populated with Jews. These areas are my B- and C cities: you can't live in a totally urban environment, but you can live in a walkable inner ring suburb or (in some cases) an even more walkable outer city neighborhood.

In sum, I hope to have shown that (1) sprawl really is a challenge for American Jews and (2) that some American Jewish communities have been more successful at meeting that challenge than ours.