The twentieth century witnessed the emergence of American Jewry on the world Jewish scene. As the century opened, the United States, with about one million Jews, was the third largest Jewish population center in the world, following Russia and Austria-Hungary. About half of the country's Jews lived in New York City alone, making it the world's most populous Jewish community by far, more than twice as large as its nearest rival, Warsaw, Poland. By contrast, just half a century earlier, the United States had been home to barely 50,000 Jews and New York's Jewish population had stood at about 16,000. Immigration provided the principal fuel behind this extraordinary American Jewish population boom. In 1900, more than 40 percent of America's Jews were newcomers, with ten years or less in the country, and the largest immigration wave still lay ahead. Between 1900 and 1924, another 1.75 million Jews would immigrate to America's shores, the bulk from Eastern Europe. Where before 1900, American Jews never amounted even to 1 percent of America's total population, by 1930 Jews formed about 3½ percent. There were more Jews in America by then than there were Episcopalians or Presbyterians. World War I ended the era of mass Jewish immigration to the United States, as wartime conditions and then restrictive quotas stemmed the human tide. Soon, for the first time in many decades, the majority of American Jews would be native born. Where the central focus of American Jewish life had been concentrated on problems of immigration and absorption, American Jewry now entered a period of stable consolidation.
The children of immigrants moved up into the middle class and out to more fashionable neighborhoods, creating new institutions—synagogue-centers, progressive Hebrew schools, and the like—as they went. History had proved that East European Jews would Americanize with a vengeance. The question now was whether, as Americans, they would still remain Jews. Programs designed to ensure that they would become high community priorities.

With stability and the rise of a new generation came a growing commitment to communal unity. Descendants of earlier Central European Jews and the more recent East European Jews had been drawing closer together in America even before World War I. After the war, with the growth of antisemitism at home and abroad as well as the economic and social challenges posed by the Great Depression of the 1930s, this process accelerated. Antisemitism peaked in America in the interwar years, and was practiced in different ways by even highly respected individuals and institutions. Private schools, camps, colleges, resorts, and places of employment all imposed restrictions and quotas against Jews, often quite blatantly. Leading Americans, including Henry Ford and the widely listened-to radio priest, Father Charles Coughlin, engaged in public attacks upon Jews, impugning their character and patriotism. In several major cities, Jews also faced physical danger; attacks on young Jews were commonplace. When coupled with the economic hardship wrought by the Great Depression, it is no surprise that Jews during these years sought to bury their differences and stress their interdependence. Leaving old world divisions behind, they began to coalesce into an avowedly American Jewish community—a community that could attempt, at least on some issues, to unite in self-defense.