

# THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER: A PLACE. . . A SYMBOL

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*Today, when the use of every community dollar is scrutinized closely, a lack of clarity about the roles and functions of the Jewish Community Center can threaten its survival. Yet, this lack of clarity is not surprising simply because the Center provides a university of multigenerational/multidisciplinary services. It is the institutional incarnation of what in the past occurred naturally—the Kehilla, the extended family, the tight-knit neighborhood.*

## THE PROBLEM

The specific function of the Jewish Community Center (JCC) is often an enigma to our members, lay leaders, colleagues, and even sometimes ourselves. We know that we serve important and necessary needs. People join our Centers, participate in our activities, and support us financially and through volunteerism. Yet, even as they depend upon Center services throughout their lives, they are not quite sure of our place in the survival of the Jewish community. This poses a major threat to the Jewish Community Center.

Jewish communal dollars are scarce and becoming scarcer. Individuals, foundations, and Jewish federations are correctly looking closely at every penny allocated. The Center competes for shrinking resources against agencies with more visibly compelling functions and service recipients. How does the Jewish Community Center get its story out?

## A UNIVERSITY OF SERVICES

This lack of clarity is not altogether surprising. JCCs — unlike hospitals, casework agencies, nursing homes, synagogues, and

so forth — do not have relatively well-defined functions. We are a university of services. This is one of our greatest strengths. We are what R. Buckminster Fuller called synergistic entities. Our *whole* is not only more than our *parts*; it is something *different*. We can no more define a JCC by listing its components than we can define human beings by specifying organs and bones.

Much of what the JCC does is embedded in the multigenerational/multidisciplinary structure of the field. Often overlooked, for example, is our work in such areas as providing on-the-job experience through our employment of high-school and college-aged youth; ameliorating the emotional and social consequences of unemployment and poverty; and influencing public policy.

Such “complexity” and “vagueness” (in their technical sense) are identified as strengths by multiple academic and professional fields from systems theory to ecology to medicine. Ludwig Wittgenstein, one of the most influential thinkers in modern philosophy, saw these characteristics as strengths inherent in language itself.

In 1990 the Jewish Community Center Association (JCCA) completed an excellent study on the mission of the Jewish Community Center. It offers crucial guidelines for the future of the Center movement (see the *STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES* at the end of this article). I hope to complement the JCC study in a modest way with conclusions drawn from a lifetime of contact with and professional work in JCCs. (I initiated my

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This analysis owes a major debt to a seminal thinker in the development of our movement, Mordecai Kaplan; to two of its prophetic voices, William Kolodney and Carl Urbont; and to the faculty of the Wurzweiler School of Social Work, 1967-1969.

observations as a rather rambunctious member of the 92nd Street Y Nursery School, Class of '43).

### A PLACE. . . A SYMBOL

The JCC is both a place and a symbol. We are a place in the sense that we are a physical building with a specific address that offers facilities and services. We are a symbol in the sense that we represent and stand for something that extends beyond our walls — Judaism as a culture, a civilization.

The essence of the Center reflects the essence of the human being: mind, body, spirit, aesthetic sensibility, and intellect. These attributes are interrelated and interconnected. The Center affirms that we are not sets of disassociated components; rather, we are people. The JCC is organized to reflect this interconnectedness not only within the individual but also within the family and the Jewish community as a whole. This is the unique meaning and strength of the Jewish Community Center.

The JCC encourages informed and creative thought. If people are in search of values, so too is the Center. If people long for knowledge and a means to participate in Jewish life, the Center provides structures both physical and nonphysical for such participation. If part of humanity is the expression of imagination and creativity, the Center presents artistic and cultural opportunities for such expression. If thought and action are inextricably connected, the Center makes it possible to act on one's thoughts and to think about one's actions.

The Center not only *reflects*; it *causes* as well. If people are in search of values, Centers must stand for something. If there is no such stance, the Center is forever a victim to the vagaries of fads and fashions. This is not a rationalization for stagnation. It is a strategy for enduring and relevant existence. Change is a means to preserve what has been meaningful or to bring us new meanings. This is apparent when we note that Jewish tradition and culture extend seamlessly into the past, and into the future.

The Jewish Community Center is the address of the Jewish community. This is true not only conceptually but practically. Jewish organizations meet at our centers. Our Centers house other Jewish communal social service agencies, such as family and children's services, services to the aged, employment and guidance services, Jewish community councils, and so forth. We build senior citizen housing. We provide space to Jewish day schools. We are a meeting place, a social hall, a mail-drop, a home where all Jews are welcome and feel comfortable. We are a place to which the non-Jewish community can look for help, and a place where the Jewish community can live out and express the best of our ideals and traditions.

As a community-based institution, the JCC seeks direction, financial support, and leadership from that community through an active, responsive, and involved board of directors. Members, parents, and other groups inform and guide policy.

The health of the Jewish Community Center is an important indicator of the health of the Jewish community. When we learn that a community has a Jewish Center, it signals us that there lives a significant and cohesive Jewish population. When a new JCC is built, it affirms a Jewish vitality and future. In those very difficult cases where a Jewish Community Center fails, it presages that Jewish community's demise.

Every age group finds a home in the Jewish Community Center, as does the family as a whole. Senior citizens, for example, maintain an identity of their own while interacting and interrelating with all age groups. If a major problem facing the aged today is their ghettoization and isolation from their extended families and from the multiple generations of which they are a part, the Center becomes that extended family and those generations. The nature of the Center makes possible integrated/articulated programs and multigenerational/multidisciplinary endeavors. And, the Center follows an individual through all stages of life.

Because the JCC serves all age groups — mornings, afternoons, and evenings — we amortize costs for health and physical education facilities, vehicles, auditoriums, and so forth over a larger number of individuals more extensively than less comprehensive institutions. The vehicle that is used to transport nursery schoolchildren in the morning, older adults at mid-day, and latch-key children after school can take our teens to a ball game at night. And how many senior centers can offer to their members Olympic-sized pools, gyms, fitness centers, and painting/dance/crafts/music studios. As in the university, concert series, art galleries, lecture programs, film festivals, dance recitals, and other arts programs that might not survive subject to the vagaries of funding inherent in single-purpose arts institutions can share costs and support within a total environment of human activity. Stability for all viable Center functions is provided by the shared costs of administrative and support staff, building maintenance and improvement, and other overhead and associated costs.

The Center reaches out past its walls to Jews who would otherwise be unable to come to it. We provide transportation for toddlers through older adults to bring them to the Center. We fought so strongly for the rights of refuseniks in the Soviet Union: people sentenced to house-arrest, locked off from all contact with friends, families, and the world. Yet, there are hundreds of thousands of elderly who are under similar house-arrest for no other reason than that they have grown old. No person, whether frail elderly or isolated teenager, need live in solitary confinement as long as the Jewish Community Center exists.

Numerous individuals suffer from poverty, job loss, and physical and mental handicaps. Government and private agencies alleviate — however marginally — the concrete deprivations. Other people suffer from the lack of middle-class housing, decent education for their children, and safe streets in their neighborhoods. *They are*

*forced to move to communities whose costs push them to the very edge of their incomes, and beyond. This is a new kind of “near poverty.”* There is no societal safety net for the social and spiritual consequences of this type of poverty. Our Centers provide the Jewish communal response through scholarships, reduced fees, programs for special needs, training and counseling, support groups, and the dignity inherent in being welcome regardless of handicap, or financial need . . . and in belonging.

The JCC is at the core of the Jewish communal infrastructure. We are in place, ready at a moment’s notice, to meet Jewish needs no matter how suddenly they meet us. At this very moment, a glorious and dramatic influx of Russian Jewish immigrants confronts American Jewry. The Jewish Community Center has become an institutional representation of the *Landsmannschaft* for a new wave of Jewish immigration that lacks the informal support systems that existed at the turn of the century. No hesitation. No pause. Only action.

Recently, there has been much talk that a central purpose of the Jewish Community Center is to serve as a common meeting ground for all denominations within the Jewish community, from Reform through Orthodox. This is, to some extent, true. Yet, it is much too passive a concept. As the JCCA affirms, we are more than an ideological neutral turf. We are a force for Jewish continuity. We celebrate our Jewishness and express it indirectly through acts of social justice and loving-kindness or directly through culture, education, and tradition. What the Jewish Community Center aspires to is to select those cultural, educational, and traditional manifestations of Judaism that can be shared by all Jews and exclude none.

The primacy of our responsibility to the Jewish community *in no way* frees us from responsibility to the general community. Jewish history is in part a history of the dialectic between our particularistic responsibilities and our responsibility to society in

general.

The Jewish Community Center serves a broad constituency and is community based. We are a window that opens to the Jewish population and the Jewish world. As such, we carry a greater responsibility in terms of the support of federation campaigns than other Jewish communal organizations. If the community has an obligation to support federation and the Jewish Community Center is a central locus of that community, then we must take leadership in this support.

The Center, as a community organization, has a primary responsibility, along with community councils, to organize the community. We interact with other Jewish communal institutions. We have continuing and continuous contacts with Jewish religious institutions; through strengthening *them*, we strengthen *ourselves*. In so far as we can bring these various and often diverse Jewish instrumentalities together, we are again acting as the *center* of the Jewish community beyond the simple notion of a building with four walls. We also interact with the non-Jewish and secular world. We form coalitions, alliances, and dialogues and we initiate action.

To borrow a concept from Alfred Korzybski, the founder of the discipline of general semantics, the Jewish Community Center is engaged in services that are not readily identified within a *simple programmatic map*. We are, for example, a major provider of job training for teenagers and young adults through our day camps, our after-school programs and our latch-key programs. Yet, we see these young people as more than employees. We understand that if they can learn to be responsible individuals holding down meaningful jobs at our Centers, this training will benefit them throughout their lives. In this way we complement services offered by comprehensive employment and counseling agencies.

The advantage of the mental health model utilized by our casework agencies is the isolation of the therapy session from the

rest of the client's life. It provides objectivity and encourages transference. The advantage of the work that we do with individuals and groups in the Jewish Community Center is exactly the opposite. We interrelate and interconnect with their total life experience. The teenager, who will only approach counseling after a relationship of trust is developed, can come to the Center, get to know the teen director, and ultimately sit down and speak to him or her. There is often no way to predict or schedule when a person really wishes to discuss thoughts and feelings. Such interchanges cannot always be scheduled for a 50-minute session on a particular day at a particular time. In the Center, some of our most important work with troubled adolescents does not occur in formal "rap" sessions. It is done on the bus ride home from a trip, while sitting around in the Teen Lounge, as the teen worker and the kid stand outside the Center before each goes his or her own way, or out on a baseball field.

We work with an individual within the context of the total family. Single mothers and fathers, who are overwhelmed and overloaded with responsibilities, not only talk to us about needs and problems but utilize our day care services or participate in activities that challenge them and relieve the stresses they face everyday.

We can observe the behavior of a child in our nursery school and put it into the context of the behavior of the child's older sibling in our elementary-aged program. We can identify the needs of a teenager and correlate them to the strengths of a young adult who might become a significant role model and "big sister." We can offer an integrated and comprehensive service that incorporates concrete services, educational programs, Jewish experience, and emotional and social counseling. Where needed, we are a nonthreatening entry point for referrals to agencies that offer psychotherapy and other intensive or short-term mental health services.

If the medium is not *all* of the message,

as Marshall MacLuhan would sometimes have us believe, it is at least *part* of it. The medium of the *group*, which is at the core of the Center's approach, provides a tool that is distinct from other therapeutic and educational modalities. The unique power of the group is best enunciated by philosophers, such as Charles Levy, who have written about social work, and philosophers, such as John Dewey, who have examined education.

The Jewish Community Center is a home to all that is best in Jewish and general culture. If poetry, music, film, art, dance, and philosophy express the best of what we are and hope to be, we present the best of them. The arts and philosophy — Jewish and secular — are not luxuries. They are part of the basic tissue of human existence. Nothing that excites the mind and the spirit is alien to us.

It puzzles me that Judaism is so often identified exclusively with qualities of the mind to the exclusion of the body. Moses Maimonides, one of our greatest sages, was a physician. Our laws and traditions are filled with reverence for the human body, even extending past death. Many of our heroes, both biblical and contemporary, are individuals of great physical prowess. The Jewish Community Center asserts the importance of physical activity and health. We do not cede the understanding of the delicate balance between mind and body to some Hellenic ideal or to modern psychology. (For an excellent analysis of the importance of athletics in American Jewish life, please see *Ellis Island to Ebbets Field*, by Peter Levine).

History tells us that we can survive and sometimes even thrive — however precariously — when separated physically from Israel. The present tells us that when the world so often seems bent on destroying Israel, Israel may not survive without us. Yet, more because of than despite the acceptance we presently enjoy in the Diaspora, assimilation threatens our existence as Jews. And, as we fight against cuts in Jewish immigration quotas to the United States and against cuts in refugee funding during a time of serious recession, we remember that only Israel sets aside all reservations and accepts all Jews. The Jewish Community Center — a part of Israel, the spirit — fights for Israel, the land.

#### CONCLUSION

The Jewish Community Center reflects the nature of Jewish life. It is with us through the life cycles that are life's markers. The Center is the institutional incarnation of what in the past often occurred naturally: the Kehilla, the extended family, the neighborhood. The Jewish Community Center does not replace other institutions in Jewish life: it reinforces them.

The Jewish Community Center is a force for Jewish continuity particularly suited to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Most of all, the Jewish Community Center affirms that Jewish life is indivisible — that we are all connected by a common identity and a common fate that extend from life's most ordinary tasks to the most elevated and treasured.

**THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER MOVEMENT  
DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES - 1990**

Created as a response to the Jewish experience in North America, **Jewish Community Centers** have evolved into major institutions in service to the Jewish community. Although each has its own history, service patterns, membership policies, resources and priorities, we are united by a common mission, by a shared vision as to how this unique institution, the JCC, builds community, promotes Jewish values and plays a vital role in insuring creative Jewish continuity.

**I.** The **Jewish Community Center** is a place where all Jews are welcome no matter where or whether they worship or whatever their age or life style. The Center sees value and potential in Jews associating with each other in a warm, Jewish environment. Each person is invited to become involved at his or her level of interest and encouraged to higher levels of involvement in Jewish life and in the community at large.

**II.** The **Jewish Community Center** focuses on what Jews have in common. We recognize that we have differences, respect the right to be different, even nurture constructive dispute, while building on our common concerns. We care about the health, welfare, growth, safety and rights of fellow Jews in North America, Israel and around the world. We seek to preserve and enrich our Jewish heritage and strengthen the Jewish family. We welcome the newcomer and reach out to those not yet involved in the Jewish community.

Israel plays so central a role in our lives and in the destiny of the Jewish people that we feel a special commitment to deepening the understanding and appreciation of Israel and to forging close ties with the people of Israel and the State of Israel.

**III.** The **Jewish Community Center** is dedicated to the enrichment of Jews as Jews, as American and Canadian citizens and as human beings. In furtherance of these goals, the Center offers an evolving array of Jewish education, cultural, health, physical education, recreation, camping, social group work and education programs and services. While we are deeply committed to serving a broad Jewish community constituency, we feel a particular responsibility to special populations and their needs.

**IV.** The **Jewish Community Center** is an institution which was created by the Jewish community to serve the needs of its members and the Jewish community. It is governed by a volunteer Board of Directors whose members are, in effect, the community's representatives and whose decision-making process places a premium on involvement and consensus building. Through its soundly conceived leadership development programs and its network of committees, the JCC attracts and nurtures leadership for itself and for the Jewish and general communities.

**V.** The **Jewish Community Center** seeks to strengthen the community. In the general community it does so by working cooperatively with an array of planning and funding organizations, governmental bodies and social service agencies to insure the presence of needed services. It also works closely with federation and community relations agencies to foster relations between the Jewish and general communities. The JCC encourages members to assume leadership positions in the community.

Within the Jewish community, the Center initiates and supports community endeavors with the federation and its network of agencies, with synagogues and with other organizations. The Center helps strengthen other Jewish institutions, serves as a community meeting place and encourages Jews to become more informed and take an active role in important contemporary Jewish issues.

Jewish Community Center Association of North America