

JEWISH COMMUNAL SERVICE AT THE EDGE OF CHAOS AND COMPLEXITY

The Challenge of Adaptation

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One of the most gratifying (and functional) aspects of working in a university is the extended summer break. Summer affords me the opportunity to engage in two activities — travel and reading — both of which are relaxing and yet enriching of what is expected of me in my work as a professor: to teach and to do research. As I thought about the subject of the Forum in this issue of the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, I realized my most recent summer reading and travel provided me with new perspectives and insights into the state of Jewish communal service today.

ALASKAN JEWS AS A PROTOTYPE

My itinerary this summer was Alaska, particularly the Alaskan Jewish community. The focus of my research was on what happens to Jews who choose to live “on the frontier,” away from large populations of other Jews and from Jewish institutional supports. Most pertinent to the *Journal* Forum is that there are very few Jewish communal organizations in Alaska — only three synagogues — and even fewer Jewish professionals — two rabbis. One is a Reform rabbi, the other is a Lubavitch rabbi in Anchorage, and there is no rabbi in the synagogue in Fairbanks. There are 3,200 Jews in Alaska, which is more than the population of Jews living in eight other states in the United States (*American Jewish Yearbook*, 1993).

Initially, my presumption was that this low level of Jewish communal organization was a function of a low level of Jewish interest and commitment of the Jews who chose to live in Alaska. This initial hypothesis was only partly true. The emerging research data indicate that the decision to settle in Alaska, for most of its Jews, is a

push-pull phenomenon. The pull of Alaska is its natural environment and slower-paced lifestyle. These are more important motivations than the push to get away from the “lower 48,” and in particular, from Jewish communal life. For the Jews choosing to live in Alaska, their prior Jewish involvements might be best described as minimal and/or irrelevant. The unexpected finding, both for the majority of Alaskan Jews and for me, was that after settling in their new life in Alaska, these frontier Jews experience a resurgent interest in their Jewishness, a desire to reclaim some connection to the Jewish religious/cultural heritage and to find and connect with other Jews.¹ The problem that then emerges is that for most of these searching Alaskan Jews there are no Jewish communal institutions and no Jewish communal professionals to help them make connections.

I would argue that Alaskan Jews and their situation are a prototype for growing numbers of American Jews living in the “lower 48”: acculturated individuals and families, a high proportion of whom are part of mixed marriages, who are moving away from traditional Jewish communities, but who are, at least, curious and/or receptive to making Jewishness a part of their lifestyle. The Alaskan experience suggests two key insights germane to this review of

¹I am now completing the analysis of both a major demographic study I conducted of Alaskan Jews and also of field visits with Jews living throughout the state. In virtually every measure of Jewish identity in the demographic survey, Alaskan Jews score higher than their counterparts in the lower 48, as measured by the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey. A fuller accounting of both the demographics and Jewish identity of Alaskan Jews will be presented in a book I am now writing on the subject.

Jewish communal service: neither of these insights should be a surprise, but if not responded to, both could have serious consequences for the capacity of the American Jewish community to reach and retain a significant proportion of the next generation of American Jews. The first insight is that without some type of organized Jewish community, both for reasons of a critical mass to make possible the education of children, the observance of Jewish holidays, and the provision of a sense of emotional support, Jewish commitment and identity will wither. Second, without some presence of a Jewish professional to serve as a convener, to foster some ongoing structure, and to provide Jewish content, it is unlikely that the Jewish receptivity will be nourished or that Jewish identity will survive with the next generation.

DECLINE OF GREAT CIVILIZATIONS

Although my typical selection of summer reading sets out to be books unrelated to the contemporary Jewish community, somehow there always seems to emerge a connection. That was clearly the case this summer despite subjects that, at least initially, seemed to be far afield: the writings of the philosopher Oswald Spengler (1950) and the historian Arnold J. Toynbee (1948) and two recent books describing the latest research of physicists and biologists updating the classical theories of relativity (Steven Weinberg, *Dreams of a Final Theory*, (1992) and of evolution (Roger Lewin, *Complexity: Life at the Edge of Chaos*, 1992).

That the work of such historians as Spengler and Toynbee, who focused on the emergence and demise of great historic civilizations and cultures, would generate insights relevant to the Jews should not have been a surprise, although I would conjecture that the writings of these two scholars are not likely to appear on the reading lists of the dozens of Jewish continuity commissions emerging in Jewish communities throughout North America. The fact is that what these commissions are about is per-

petuating the contemporary community and responding to threats to its survival, just as earlier generations of Jewish leaders confronted earlier threats to the survival of the great Jewish civilization. Indeed, a valuable perspective for Jewish leaders to gain from the broad historical analyses of Spengler and Toynbee is that great civilizations, despite their power and impact on society, do decline. In fact, the decline is often a function of the arrogance and complacency that affect the leadership elite and diminish their commitment to the ideals that inspired their civilization. The leaders mistakenly assumed that the past achievements of their civilization would automatically ensure its survival in the face of changing external circumstances. They failed to recognize that, as they ceased to serve as moral and ideological exemplars of the civilizations, they lost the respect and support of the folk. Lacking this support, the civilization collapsed.

A fundamental question emerging from this analysis for leaders of today's American Jewish community — both volunteer and professional — is whether they have become smug in their positions of power and in their leadership style and have lost touch with their folk, whose Jewish interests and aspirations are notably different from their predecessors.

Both Spengler and Toynbee note that it is as a result of regular confrontation and successful adaptation to changing societal challenges that cultures become invigorated and thrive. Isolation and maintenance of the status quo contribute to cultural decline.

Toynbee adds one other important requisite for the survival of a civilization, which it is important to highlight for today's Jewish leaders. He posits that if a great civilization becomes absorbed only in its own survival and ceases to generate important new ideas and insights for the broader society it is likely to decline. On one level this self-centeredness diminishes mutually enriching interchanges with other cultures, and no less important, as people recognize

that their civilization is not living up to its reputation as being innovative and creative, their pride and commitment diminish. In a similar vein this generation of Jews, committed to living in two cultures, would not be impressed with a Jewish community that separated itself from the larger society and its agenda.

EVOLUTIONARY THEORIES OF CHAOS AND COMPLEXITY

Surprisingly similar insights emerge from the natural scientists as they apply the great advances in scientific knowledge and computer modeling to seek more definitive understandings of the workings of the diverse systems that comprise the universe. The latest evolutionary theories of chaos and complexity resonate with the historians' linkage of great civilizations to their regular confrontation and adaptation to external challenges.

Roger Lewin (1992) in his book, *Complexity: Life at the Edge of Chaos*, reviews the latest developments in the fields of physics, biology, and chemistry. Scientists begin by recognizing, in all living species, "the emergence of an inexorable drive toward ever greater complexity" and a commensurate need for "ever greater information processing" (Lewin, 1992, p. 191) to adapt to the new challenges. Those species that survive are not those that seek to avoid the demands of the changing external environment, but rather those that confront the new reality directly. They "bring themselves to the edge of chaos" — in effect, the gateway to the complex environment — sensing this is a place for the "optimization of computational ability." Here "bigger brains are built" as the species seek to develop "order out of chaos" and to learn to adapt to their new environmental challenges. Lewin concludes his exploration of complexity and "the lure of the edge of chaos" by posing the relevant question for us: "Is human consciousness to be found there too?" (Lewin, 1992, p. 149).

Lewin's question is a logical segue to the

issue of whether these scientific inquiries pertain not only in a general sense to the human species but more specifically to our concerns with the challenges that now confront the professionals in the field of Jewish communal service. To be more pointed, what relevant insights can be extracted from these lofty philosophic and scientific explorations that might inform Jewish communal professionals as they assess their leadership role in the American Jewish community in the last years of the last decade of the 20th century?

At the outset, I would argue that all bodies of knowledge and professional disciplines can be advanced by periodically approaching their domains from a fresh perspective. Doing so generates not only a different understanding of the nature of the problem (how Jewish professionals understand the present threat of assimilation as posed by the results of the National Jewish Population Survey) but also different ways of approaching the problem (defining community priorities, strategies, and programs). A related and important byproduct is the realization that truth is best pursued not from any single scientific discipline, but from a multidisciplinary, systemic orientation. Soon after physicist Steven Weinberg embarked upon his bold quest for "A Final Theory...the universal truths about nature," he reported a basic discovery. The several vital explanatory ideas "revealed a remarkable pattern: they do not form separate disconnected crumbs, representing independent sciences, and they do not wander aimlessly — rather they are all connected, and if followed backward, they all seem to flow from a common starting point (Weinberg, 1992, p. 6).

Weinberg's insight is of utility to the Jewish communal professional not only to encourage movement away from intellectual parochialism in the realm of diagnosis — understanding the challenges to Jewish continuity — but in applying this multidisciplinary perspective to community action strategies. Such a perspective recog-

nizes the shared concern and wisdom available among the several Jewish communal professionals (social workers, educators, rabbis, etc.), as well as the benefits of programs implemented with the involvement and collaboration of the different disciplines.

AFFIRMING THE CRITICAL IMPORTANCE OF THE JEWISH COMMUNAL PROFESSIONAL

As a transitional step in moving this analysis from the realm of general truths to specific ideas and recommendations about the state of Jewish communal service, I want to introduce a "middle-range" principle, which is basic to the recommendations that will follow. This principle affirms the critical importance today of the Jewish communal professional. Initially, that may sound like a truism or perhaps even self-serving. However, such an affirmation is needed to be responsive to two sets of changes occurring in the Jewish community today:

- (1) changes in the needs and interests of the Jewish generation coming of age and
- (2) changes in the leadership pattern of the American Jewish community, which have eroded the power and influence of the Jewish communal professional.

First, consider the changing Jewish "folk." My experience meeting and working with the Jews of Alaska helped me understand more clearly that the changes in today's generation of Jews are occurring faster than the typical incremental pace. It is change of watershed proportions. Today's generation are third-, fourth-, and fifth-generation highly sophisticated American Jews, most of whom have some Jewish backgrounds and hold widely varying attitudes about their Jewishness, ranging from those who view it as irrelevant to those who view Jewishness as enriching their lives. They are much more independent and autonomous than their parents and grandparents in deciding how, if at all, Jewishness will be part of their lives. They are free and open to exploring other quite accessible re-

ligious or secular ideologies. Clearly, a key datum for how this generation will decide on their own or their family's religious identity is the reality that most of them are, or will be, part of mixed marriages.

I remind the reader that I introduce the case of the Alaskan Jews because I believe they are a prototype of the American Jews of tomorrow. Yet, it is also a useful case to learn about the importance of professionals in a situation where, due to isolation, the needs of the people are exacerbated and there is a virtual absence of Jewish communal professionals. In my modest community organizing role in the several Alaskan cities and towns, I could see the difference that even a very short-term professional presence could make. The role is essentially one of enabling or empowering — helping scattered Jewish individuals and families respond to their life agendas. The two key issues on that agenda most frequently are a growing awareness of a sense of loneliness, often attributable to being separated from family and other support networks, and an uncertainty about values and life's meaning. The issue that follows is where to turn, both for fellowship and to explore the core issues of identity that concern them. The Alaskans of Jewish background soon discover that most of their neighbors have found their network in one of the Christian or alternative religious communities. These options just do not feel right for the great majority of Alaskan Jews. Often to their surprise, these minimalist Jews then find themselves seeking out other Jews. The quest is complicated by the reality that there are so few of them and their personal and Jewish interests are quite different. So, even if they are able to find and connect with a critical mass of other Jews, the question is whether they will be able to achieve and sustain a sense of community. It is at this juncture that the presence (even for a limited time) of a Jewish communal professional can make a critical difference.

A Jewish communal professional initially serves to convene — to bring like-

minded searchers together, help them define their shared interests and ways they might be supportive to one another, and, maybe, especially where there are children, help supplement the families' limited knowledge as they assume responsibility for passing on their shared Jewish traditions. In some of these Alaskan communities the convening only happened in response to my presence in the role of a visiting professional; in others, my professional intervention helped the community strengthen its structure and see more clearly the breadth and potential of the Jewish tradition and its relevance to their lives.

My second reason for affirming the centrality of the Jewish communal professional is that recent changes in the leadership pattern of the American Jewish community have weakened the role and status of the Jewish professional. These changes are a result of the combination of greater stringencies in agency budgets due to the current economic recession with the emergence of a new generation of sophisticated lay leaders who are assuming a more active role in the governance of Jewish communal organizations (Reisman, 1990). These developments have not only diminished the impact of the professionals but, in a broader sense, have also weakened the network of Jewish organizations, as well as the image of the professional and the field of Jewish communal work.

EDUCATING JEWISH COMMUNAL PROFESSIONALS

If the Jewish community is to mobilize its resources effectively to adapt to the watershed changes with which it is now confronted, there is no higher priority than strengthening its cadre of Jewish professionals. Gerald Bubis has done an impressive job in his article of detailing the specifics of what he defines as "the deprofessionalization" of both Jewish communal organizations and the Jewish Communal Service Association (JCSA). I agree with virtually all of Bubis' basic analysis and recommen-

dations. In this concluding section I will build on his action proposals and offer additional suggestions, most of which are consonant with Bubis' ideas, with perhaps an occasional difference in priorities. To understand our modest differences in perspective requires a brief review of a critical juncture 25 years ago as each of us was contemplating the design of a new approach to educating Jewish communal professionals.

I believe it is accurate to state that Bubis and I have been most responsible for launching, over the past quarter of a century, the emergence of a new phase in the education of Jewish communal professionals — the several graduate programs in Jewish communal service. During that period of time we have always been good colleagues and friends who have collaborated closely with each other in an open and mutually respectful manner. There has been only one important issue in the realm of Jewish communal service on which we have differed, and it is addressed in Bubis' article when he poses the question: "Is Jewish communal service a field or a profession?" My position is that it is, or should be, a profession, and accordingly the professional graduate program in Jewish communal service I helped create at Brandeis University developed its own master's degree curriculum geared specifically to the needs of the American Jewish community and its Jewish communal organizations. We broke from the tradition of the prior 50 years in which social work was viewed as the requisite professional preparation for Jewish communal work (Reisman, 1972).

Bubis' view at that time (and that of the several other graduate programs that emerged later in the 1970s and 1980s) was grounded in the conviction that Jewish communal service was *both* a field and a profession. The graduate program Bubis developed at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles combined a core master's degree from a school of social work with a supplemental master's degree focusing on Jewish knowledge and professional skills appropri-

ate to working in Jewish communal agencies (Bubis, 1969, 1971).

What are the advantages and disadvantages, from the perspective of the well-being of the Jewish community, of the two approaches to educating Jewish communal professionals?

The primary advantage of the single-degree graduate program in Jewish communal service is that its objective is solely focused on socializing Jewish students for careers as Jewish professionals who will work in Jewish communal agencies. The curriculum is integrated, blending professional skills with a knowledge of Jewish history, religion, and values. Its major disadvantage is that the restricted focus of the degree in Jewish communal service may not appeal to some quality applicants and will have diminished utility for careers outside the Jewish community.

The advantage of the two-degree graduate programs is both *substantive* — offering a broader curriculum with a wider range of knowledge and skills — and in terms of *status*. They confer two degrees, including one nonsectarian degree, which adds prestige and is likely to serve as an incentive to attract quality candidates. At least from the perspective of the applicant, having the second degree in social work (or business or management) offers broader professional career opportunities. Yet, might this advantage also serve to dilute the professional's commitment to the Jewish community and its network of agencies? A related set of questions concern the matter of professional identity. How do the graduates define their professional identity: are they social workers, Jewish communal workers, or something else?² What are the core professional values transmitted in the two graduate programs? Are they compatible? To which code of ethics do the graduates subject their practice? Who are their role models? To use Bubis' phrase, "with which professional colleagues do they cast their lot?"²

By way of perspective, it is well to be re-

minded of the reality, noted by Bubis, that only 15% of all the professionals now employed by Jewish communal organizations are graduates of the specialized graduate schools of Jewish communal service. For all of the advantages and disadvantages discussed about these programs, the goals of the American Jewish community would be better served by either the single or double-degree graduate programs in Jewish communal service than other graduate programs that lack a significant Jewish component.

THE ROLE OF THE PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION

Bubis makes a persuasive case that a key antidote to the forces of deprofessionalization that are weakening the field of Jewish communal service should be the Jewish Communal Service Association. It is only in recent years that the JCSA changed its name from the Conference of Jewish Communal Service. The change in name and mission seemed to reflect its evolution from its prior role, primarily sponsoring an annual conference, to becoming a professional association for professionals working in the full range of Jewish communal organizations. The new Association assumed a broader agenda, including establishing and monitoring professional standards, developing a code of ethics, and seeking to upgrade the status of the profession.

²Over the past 9 years Brandeis University has conducted annual continuing education institutes for outstanding young Jewish professionals working in the full gamut of Jewish communal organizations. Each year the participants are asked to respond to a questionnaire about their professional identity. Their diverse responses to the question of how they define themselves as a professional indicate the absence of any clear professional identity (N=208).

• Function in agency (fund raiser, group worker, etc.)	29%
• Jewish communal worker	26%
• Social worker	17%
• Administrator, manager	15%
• Other professional (rabbi, lawyer, educator)	12%

Paradoxically, as the JCSA broadened its professional scope, its membership and influence have declined. Consider that the membership of the CJCS/JCSA has declined from a high of 2,985 members in 1984 to 2,390 members in 1994. Even more dramatic is the decline in attendance at its Annual Conferences. In the early 1980s attendance averaged between 600 to 750 participants, whereas over the past 5 years conference attendance has averaged between 400 to 500, with an historic low of 395 in 1994 (Joel Ollander, personal communication, July 1994).

The decline in membership and in attendance at the annual conferences can be attributed to two related factors. The first is the growing diversity of professional background and identity of the people being hired in recent years to work in Jewish communal organizations. Many of the new professionals have a primary loyalty to their generic profession and feel no attraction to the JCSA. Increasingly, new hires only have a bachelor's degree and have had no formal professional schooling.

The second factor is the growing parochialization of the field of Jewish communal service. Professional and lay leaders of the national agencies, such as the Jewish Community Centers Association and the Council of Jewish Federations, as well as the professional leaders of the Affiliated Professional Associations, such as the Association of Jewish Center Professionals and the Association of Jewish Community Organization Personnel, are affording greater priority to the recruitment and training needs of their specific agencies and do not encourage their professionals to participate in the Annual Conference or other programs of the JCSA.

Two explanations are offered to justify this turn inward. The primary rationale is that it responds to realistic financial pressures now confronting the American Jewish community. A second explanation is that the several fields of Jewish communal service are becoming more specialized, and

therefore they have less in common. My concern is primarily with this second justification, which impresses me as seriously shortsighted, underestimating the generic aspects of professional knowledge and skills of the field, and most important, negating the vital and growing importance of the Jewish mission of the Jewish communal agencies. As it relates to the importance of a strong cadre of professionals to guide the continuity agenda, this weakening of the JCSA — the one force contributing to a coherent sense of commonality and shared professionalism among Jewish communal workers — becomes a major adaptive challenge for the American Jewish community.

I endorse Bubis' call for convening a meeting of the top leaders of the APAs to address this problem, but I would add a call for convening the top national lay leaders of the American Jewish community as well. The trend to the "balkanization" of the field of Jewish communal service is too big a problem to leave just to the professionals.

CONCLUSION

The penultimate chapter of physicist Steven Weinberg's book in quest of an overarching theory of the laws of nature is entitled "What About God?" In it, he asks, "Will we find an interested God in the final laws of nature?" As a scientist concerned about the historic threat to rationality emanating from religion, he comes to the conclusion: "I think we will not" (Weinberg, 1992, p. 245). At the same time he quotes another physicist, Albert Einstein, who also sought to explain the order and complexity of the universe, asking a similar question: "Why nature is thus and not otherwise?" His response: "Thereby one experiences, so to speak, that God Himself could not have arranged these connections in any other way than that which factually exists" (Weinberg, 1992, p. 242).

Concluding this evaluation of the state of Jewish communal service by raising a question about God is not done with the interest of arriving at a correct answer, but rather to

suggest that the spiritual realm is something about which Jewish leaders are obliged to think. After all, the Jewish civilization that we are seeking to sustain traces its origins to a Divine Covenant. Perhaps exploring whether God is relevant to the way Jewish leaders confront the challenge of survival, on the edge of the 21st century, might help them muster the discipline needed to rise above personal agendas and generate the vision and moral courage to risk change.

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