

An Experience in Training Staff for Jewish Family Life Education*

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As we define and redefine our role as a Jewish family agency, we will have to come to terms with our role in Jewish family life education — that of understanding and accepting varied practices of different sections of the Jewish religious community; of helping group members open up and deal with the troubling issues they bring to the group, leaving them free to decide where they want to be with their Jewishness.

THE Boston Jewish Family and Children's Service prepared for this year's exciting experience in Jewish Family Life Education with a number of staff meetings in 1973-4 which involved several psychiatrists discussing the development of individual identity and Jewish identity. Towards the end of this period, the administration employed a half-time staff member to initiate contact with rabbis for the purpose of developing discussion groups on Jewish family life issues, and general family life concerns including problems of inter-relationships. This activity represented a commitment by the agency to direct its knowledge and skills more specifically to Jewish concerns and problems of identity.

I want to describe what we have done — what we have learned — and where we go from here. Our experience can hopefully add to the experience of other agencies in developing a range of possibilities in approaches.

Family Life Education refers to a service that has been offered by many Jewish family agencies to their communities, usually to groups meeting over a limited period of time, dealing with such subjects as Adolescent Problems, Pre-marital Relationships, Concerns about Elderly Parents, etc. I would term Jewish Family Life Education, a more

recent service, as including groups meeting over a limited period of time, but dealing primarily with Jewish concerns. Interestingly, we have found that the family life education groups, especially when they take place in synagogues or temples and in cooperation with these institutions, will often focus on Jewish issues such as inter-dating even when the intended topic was a neutral "Relationship of Parents to Adolescents." This tells us where many parents are: concerned over the Jewishness of their children in the present and in the future. While this concern may have been latent, it will arise and stimulate a very productive interchange in a group.

Despite our planning, not all groups eventuated for a variety of reasons.

The Jewish Family Life Education groups had a more specific Jewish focus from the start. Let me divide them into three categories and illustrate each of these.

First, there was a group of parents in a suburban community dealing with challenges to today's family that not only discussed their own differences in feelings and practices of Judaism in their own families, and their personal relationship to the general community, but also concerns about their growing children and whether their children would retain a sense of their Jewish identity.

Second, there was a *Chavera* group consisting of couples belonging to another suburban temple, but feeling gen-

erally isolated from many other couples because of their newness in the community. The purpose of the group was to give them a sense of "an extended Jewish family," and to enrich their lives together as Jews. The issues that were discussed dealt with their sense of their own identity as individuals and as Jews. These issues and others emerged to a large extent from the group itself. Following the completion of seven sessions which were co-led by two staff members, the group has proceeded to meet on their own for discussions and social activities. The rabbi was very pleased with the results in this first group, and two other groups are now meeting. None of this would have occurred without the impetus and strong cooperation of the rabbi whose view (as written in a letter) was that this development met "a need of young, mobile, suburban Jewish families — to connect with people on a more-than-superficial basis and to find a kind of face-to-face relationship and greater intimacy than membership in Temple ordinarily provided." The rabbi was impressed by a synagogue and Jewish agency working together successfully on a project.

Third, was the further development of a program that was initiated three years ago, in cooperation with the Academy of Jewish Studies of the Northeast Council of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in the Greater Boston area. The practice is that when man and woman desire to be married by a Reform rabbi and one of them is not Jewish, they are referred to the Academy program where the non-Jew can consider conversion to Judaism which is a requisite for marriage by the rabbi. The requirement includes a sixteen-week course, termed "Introduction to Judaism." Concurrently with these courses, the agency agreed to assign a staff member to lead elective courses for these couples dealing with the emotional aspects of conversion and inter-marriage. This proved to be

successful during the two semesters that year, and after a hiatus of two years, during the 1974-75 year, we have staffed three groups for approximately seven sessions each.

The elective course for these couples offered an opportunity to discuss the emotions experienced in such steps as giving up one's Christian affiliation; acceptance by the Jewish community if conversion is concluded; relations to Jewish and non-Jewish parents in the event of conversion or in its absence; and the rich meanings in embracing Judaism and the Jewish people. This collaboration has helped us to work even more closely with the rabbinate of all sections of Judaism. For some individual couples the educational discussion may well lead to counselling. The critical need for this kind of work is highlighted by the reported growing number of intermarriages and similarly, the increase in conversions to Judaism. The service is an emphatic expression of our concern not only for the continued survival of the Jewish people, but for its enhancement and enrichment.

In developing the training program for staff members, we structured a weekly seminar for those who were interested in leading Jewish family life groups. The seminar had a two-fold purpose — learning group techniques, and dealing with Jewish identity problems. The staff included members who ranged from social work students to those with a number of years of experience in individual treatment; with only a few having had experience in leading groups. The leader of this training program was a very experienced person with a strong Jewish commitment; a social worker with a highly developed skill in individual and group treatment, and an orientation that is transactional analytic. We omitted a didactic course of Jewish content, traditions, customs, values, etc., because we felt that a stronger

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and more timely motivation for learning this would emerge during the training experience when Jewish issues would be faced and begin to be discussed.

How did most of the staff feel about working in a Jewish agency when this training program was introduced? It would be safe to say that at the time they were employed by the agency, their reasons for selecting a Jewish agency was not discussed. It could be assumed that they felt this was a good agency for the learning and practice of social work. However, would not another agency have been just as satisfactory? It may have been more comfortable to work in a Jewish agency, but this was never really explored. In their one-to-one counseling of clients, it could be assumed that issues of Jewishness were seldom discussed.

What were some of the questions and issues that came up during the training period as the staff discussed existing group experiences and their reactions to them?

1. How Jewish do you have to be to either work in the agency or lead Jewish family life education groups?

2. Was there an implicit or explicit policy of the agency regarding Jewish identification or was it a position that was constantly evolving?

3. Concern that their broadly humanistic social work philosophy, which is what workers bring to the agency, might be challenged by a religious or rabbinical position on such issues as inter-dating, premarital sex, patterns of living together without marriage, etc.

4. What does being Jewish actually mean and how much of one's feeling was based only on past family experiences?

5. The role of the Jewish male as conceived by women staff members as a result of their early family or religious experience, and the present emphasis on the status of women.

6. The views on inter-marriage and conversion.

7. Uneasiness with the idea that Jews were special people, or placing this in other terms, that they were "chosen by God."

8. An expression of anxiety, uneasiness and inexperience with relating to rabbis and synagogues that marked the beginning phase of the program gave way to a noticeable degree of comfort that developed as they handled these earlier feelings.

9. Personal views on religion and religious affiliation; possible hostility towards the nature of the organized Jewish community such as methods of fund-raising and issues of authority in the central Jewish community organization.

10. In counselling relationships, was it the role of the social worker to highlight those Jewish issues which were not apparent? For example, did the client who had a problem in separating from family go home for the traditional Passover Seder and what took place?

I can only briefly describe the actual training process in this paper which has direct reference to why these issues emerged. As a leader of a group described what was taking place, the training consultant utilized various techniques such as roleplaying by staff members who would simulate the manner in which members of the education group dealt with the Jewish issues. This served to evoke their own attitudes and concerns. The staff exercise of describing in very few words what Jews are like brought them closer to perceiving the values — negative or positive — they attached to these traits. The principal aim was to get staff in closer touch with their own attitudes, as a way of sensitizing them to the problems emerging in the actual Jewish family life education group and of examining the role of the leader in such a group.

During the discussion of the experiences with the conversion groups, many of the already enumerated Jewish issues arose. At this point, an allusion to the discussion content in conversion groups illustrate the role of the leader and the agency point-of-view. Each group experience has been different — the individuals who came to it are different — and the issues and content discussed were different:

Can the non-Jewish person expect to give up completely or actually deny or renounce his or her Christian background? Is conversion to Judaism very easy because it lacks the dogma of Christianity, with some individuals expressing the belief that to be Jewish does not require affiliation or regular attendance at synagogue or temple? Is Judaism simply acceptable because Jews have a more liberal attitude towards different people and issues and this happens to coincide with one's own liberal views? Why was there pressure by the Jewish parents that a conversion take place, and would this make one more acceptable to them? Can a possible convert see a process in the development of a Jewish identity that may begin at the point of conversion but needs to be continually worked on by a couple after marriage? Do they see the emotional aspects along with the intellectual awareness of a Jewish identity, such as the feelings about the State of Israel; the sense of difference that Jews can feel while at the same time being part of a total community?

It was found that individuals sometime need to defend themselves against facing issues, possibly because this may threaten the relationship of the couple themselves. Thus, a leader must have sensitivity and fine skill. The social work leader cannot be a teacher in the full sense of the word or represent any other point of view except to direct the discussion towards the deeper level of understanding of what it means to enter a marital relationship where each gives up some part of his own individuality in forging a new unity; a relationship made more difficult by facing and coming to terms with the

issue of Jewishness. The opening of honest communication between the couple themselves would be one of the goals of such a group. I refer to *both* of the individuals who are considering marriage, because we found that the Jewish member is also engaged in a struggle to find the meaning of his or her own Jewishness.

In summary, what has our agency learned from this year's total experience and what possible direction do we consider in the coming year?

(1) The need for staff members who are interested in leading Jewish family life education groups to become even more aware of their own attitudes and feelings about being Jewish and working in a Jewish agency. The non-Jewish worker too needs to look at his own attitudes in choosing to work in a Jewish agency. This issue is not an easy one to face, but especially vital, as we define the agency's direction and goals. It appears significant to me that only as the staff become very involved in this whole training process can they examine aspects of their own identity; sources, present aspect, direction. We can anticipate that changes will occur with time. When we free ourselves to look at our own Jewishness, we will be freer to use that understanding and add it to our skill in working with individuals as well as with groups.

It was significant that the agency's annual meeting coincided with the end of this training period and the program portion of the meeting dealt with Jewish family life education, and, specifically, with our experience in leading conversion groups. We had fifteen staff members leading table discussions on a hypothetical case of a couple who came to a conversion group. The table groups consisted of board and corporation members as well as staff. The large attendance was obviously concerned with-

this whole issue and were active in the discussions. This was followed by a panel consisting of a staff member and a rabbi who had been co-leaders in one conversion group. The rabbi was a member of the board and had been instrumental in the initiation of the conversion groups. The reaction that followed the meeting was most enthusiastic and we felt that they had gained a greater appreciation both of the agency's role as well as the skills of the staff. I am certain that our staff also felt a great deal of satisfaction both in the recognition they received as well as the feeling that all they had been through during the training period, while painful at times in the degree of introspection that took place, had been worthwhile.

(2) There will be a need for supervision or consultation with individual leaders or small groups of leaders in assisting staff to further develop their skills in leading Jewish family life education groups. This should also assist in sensitizing workers to the many Jewish issues.

(3) Working with rabbis in establishing groups requires clarification and acceptance by both the religious institution and the agency on the issues that could arise, and an awareness of each other's viewpoints. While the staff member who is responsible for initiating the discussion with the rabbi is quite aware of the need for this, so also does the prospective leader who will carry through the final arrangements need to be sensitive to the views of the rabbi. There has to be some on-going discussion between the two during the life of the group so that he is aware of the issues discussed. When the group ends, it would be important for the rabbi and leader to discuss the experience. This process is vital for not only do we want to establish and preserve a relationship, but also because the agency shares with the rabbinate the concern for strengthening Jewish identity, though our approaches and the skills are

different. In essence, I am saying that we need to develop a trust between agency and the rabbinate wherever there is opportunity to do this.

(4) Going back to an earlier reference in this article to the omission from worker preparation of education in Jewish traditions and values, I would point out that the need, and therefore the planning, for it have greater acceptance now among the staff. They have witnessed and absorbed the lessons of the actual experience of the agency so far and they recognize the consultant as a committed and knowledgeable Jewish person who uses Jewish content in her work.

5. From the administrative point of view, we see the need to discuss the Jewishness of the agency with the Jewish or non-Jewish social worker who is seeking employment here. The recognition of where we are at this time and their desire to be a part of its forward movement become important factors in the hiring procedure. When we relate what we have gained in this educational service to our counselling service, we realize the need to develop a greater sensitivity to Jewish identity issues that may be possibly involved in the client's choice of our particular agency, and to learn how to deal with them as part of the problem that has brought the client to us. Supervision is an essential medium for this integrative aspect of learning.

Regarding the further development of the Jewish Family Life Education program, I would add two other challenges or approaches which might be attempted:

1. With the knowledge that more than one-half of Jewish families are not affiliated with religious institutions, we recognize the need to reach out and develop groups on a variety of Jewish family life education topics in concert with other Jewish community organizations; also, the agency should consider es-

tablishing groups, utilizing the Jewish-English press as a publicity vehicle. In addition, Federation Young Leadership and Women's Divisions are increasingly concerned about Jewish identity and the challenges to it in this modern-day world, and themselves may aptly constitute educational groups.

2. I believe we have to be both imaginative and creative, with a strong sense of what we uniquely have to offer the community, and to learn from our successes as well as our failures.

In conclusion, I see our agency and staff as accepting that Jewishness is a

major concern of a Jewish family agency. As we define and redefine our role as a Jewish family agency, we will have to come to terms with our role in Jewish family life education — that of understanding and accepting varied practices of different sections of the Jewish religious community; of helping group members open up and deal with the troubling issues they bring to the group, leaving them free to decide where they want to be with their Jewishness. I have faith that this process carries with it an opportunity for the enhancement of Jewishness in many individuals.