

Meeting the Challenge of an Evolving Jewish Community*

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TWENTY-EIGHT years ago in Atlantic City, New Jersey, I was about to graduate from the then New York School of Social Work and attended, still paying student registration fees, my first National Conference of Jewish Communal Service.

I went to many meetings and sessions most of which caused confusion for me and my peers. One, I guess, must understand that I spent the first twenty-two years of my life in Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania, and from ages fourteen to twenty-two worked in the Jewish Community Center of that community, so to attend a National Conference and discover the large numbers of people who are employed and committed to a field was mind boggling. What was even more mind boggling in moving from session to session and group to group and meeting to meeting was to hear what for me was a new and *oppressive* theme that appeared to run throughout that national conference. That theme was "What's Jewish about Social Work?" I must state that in preparing for this presentation I was carried back to that Conference twenty-eight years ago and consider myself fortunate that I was not swept up by the mystique of what revolved around social work as contrasted with being Jewish.

Today we find another issue that appears to pervade the literature and the thinking about our practice. At the risk of overstating or over-simplifying, I would suggest that the theme today revolves around the question "What's Social Work about Jewish Communal Service?" Although I am perfectly comfortable with designating myself as a social work professional, I must say that I am perfectly clear about my own self identification as that of a Jewish communal professional. I find *that* description is not only much more appropriate but is much more satisfying in defining for myself who and what I am.

I take pains at the outset of this presentation to make what for some may be an uncomfortable over-generalization because it will establish the spirit and the nature of the presentation that will follow.

Dan Mann, our esteemed president of the Conference, Jerry Bubis, my good friend and colleague and immediate past president of the Conference, and Joel Ollander, our executive director, in interpreting to me my responsibility for this evening, laid out a set of issues and questions that would take a much more articulate person than myself a half a day to respond to. Joel jestingly suggested that I could have had a more difficult assignment by being asked to explain Judaism while standing on one foot, but also let me know that since Hillel was essentially able to do that, I

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should have the capacity to respond to the issue of "Meeting the Challenge of an Evolving Jewish Community" in under forty minutes and do it in a way that will provoke an intelligent discussion period to follow.

In order to do that, I will not talk about those phenomena with which you are already familiar. We know about the significant changes that are taking place in the American Jewish community. We have listened to and read studies of American Jewish demography which indicate to us the movement of Jews from traditional urban communities to new communities described as sunbelt. We have participated in conversations in planning sessions, whereby if we hadn't before, we have come to recognize that those sunbelt communities do not have the roots and traditions of organized Jewish communities; also absent are the infrastructures that have taken a minimum of five decades to build—an infrastructures of Federations, agencies and *systems* of Jewish communal service. At the same time, the new sunbelt communities are experiencing disproportionate numbers of the elderly and don't have the same kind of economic base that most of our more traditional communities are fortunate to have.

We also know that for the most part the emerging adult generation of the American Jewish community is moving into managerial positions as contrasted with the predecessor generations which occupied essentially entrepreneurial positions. This should not be misread to conclude that the emerging generation will be any *less* affluent than the preceding generation. Professionals and managers also have the capacity to accumulate capital, and as one who is vitally concerned with financial resources, I caution us not to make the mistake of underestimating what the financial net worth of our Jewish community of the future will be.

I also won't spend a lot of time commenting on what is the changing political nature of our Jewish communal leadership and, in fact, a good deal of the Jewish community itself. There is no question but that we are moving from a progressive liberal political philosophy to one which is acculturating with the high middle income WASP value system which is conservative and which questions the political philosophy from which we have emerged and which essentially underpins our professional value system.

I also will not comment extensively on the economic status of the American Jewish community. Our wealth, our level of education, our technical acumen, our professional status and, again, our move into positions of influence in almost every sector of the American economic life are facts well documented by others and well known by all of us.

I'm reminded when I think about these changes, particularly those dealing with education, that my first professional assignment in the Jewish community was in Toledo, Ohio, where I was the director of Youth Activities at the Jewish Community Center. As part of my assignment, I obviously staffed the Youth Activities Committee. Again, in reflecting, I am struck by the fact that I was looked to by the members of that committee, all of whom represented at least relative affluence, as the most knowledgeable, the most expert person in that committee room with regard to working with young people. There was recognition by all of the members of the committee that although my salary was only \$4,000, I was the best educated person in the room. Times have indeed changed. Fortunately, my salary is no longer \$4,000 but I am also no longer the best educated person in any room in the Jewish community.

Now that I have indicated all of the

issues I will not comment on, let's look at some I want to deal with.

How do we, as a group of professionals, deal with the changes that I have *not* described for you? How do we examine our social welfare base? How do we recognize that the value system which emerged out of the New Deal and spawned the multitude of programs was not an unqualified success? How do we build into our intellectual gut the fact that the war on poverty did not produce the kind of results that were promised? How do we temper our idealism with the realities of the world immediately around us? How do we question? How do we examine without being destructive? And probably most significantly, how do we integrate into our thinking and planning and, in fact, into our practice, the realization that our lay leadership is not philosophically in the same place as our lay leadership of a decade ago? How do we recognize, without confrontation, that *that* lay leadership which has the responsibility for policy formulation represents a value system that is different than the one which was inculcated into us, particularly for those who are of my generation, during our professional education? The liberalism of the 50's and 60's has moved into the conservatism of the 80's. How many of your lay leaders are active in the Republican party not only because they think it is good for Israel, but because the philosophical bent of the Reagan administration is more consistent with their thinking than the philosophical inclinations that came out of the Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations?

And, while we're struggling with these uncomfortable realities, it seems to me that we must also recognize that there are clients and there are clients. There continues to be the old, the sick, the infirm, the distressed and the poor. But the old are not necessarily poor, the sick

are not necessarily old. There are wealthy who are old, there are wealthy who are distressed—there are unemployed who yesterday were solid, middle income citizens and there are those who have needs that can best be addressed communally irrespective of wealth or condition. How do we help our lay leadership understand that the middle-income Jew who lost a job yesterday because of economic conditions is as entitled to the services of the Jewish community as the poor and sick? How do we communicate to our leadership and, in fact, to our community that every member of the Jewish community has call upon the services of the Jewish community, and those who give have a right to receive, and those who receive have a responsibility to give? How do we construct a set of services to assure creative continuity?

Let's talk for a moment about the Jewish community and the larger society in which we find ourselves. First, I think some facts that all of us can agree upon:

1. The Jews as a group in the United States are more affluent than in any other place that they have ever been or any other time in our history.

2. Jews as a group are better educated than any other group in the United States and probably better educated than we have ever been at any place, at any other time.

3. We, as Jews, occupy professional and occupational positions in more places than we ever have before. Conversely, we are excluded from fewer occupations and executive suites and country clubs than our predecessors.

4. We, as Jews, both collectively and individually, are far more influential politically on every level—international, national, and local than we have ever been before and certainly much more so than our numbers would indicate that we have a right to be.

5. With all of the problems sur-

rounding Israel—Lebanon, Sabra and Shatilla, the West Bank, Ashkenazim and Sephardim, Israel commands more attention, more positive attention, more support, politically, morally and financially from the U.S. public than any other nation around the world. Israel probably gets more front page space in the major daily newspapers than any other nation around the world with the exception of super powers.

So, my friends, as the saying goes, if things are so good, why are we so bad? You and I know that we are paying the price of our success. We are emulating not only through acculturation, but through active processes of assimilation, the value and behavior patterns of middle-class America, *and we are doing it even more so*. We are, as I suggested earlier, not only growing more conservative, but we are growing less traditional in those behavioral patterns which have served us so well. Our family structure, our value system, our ties to community—those supports which have kept us strong—are now weakening. We have, as a matter of fact, moved away from our Jewish organizational bonds, those bonds which have enriched our Jewish lives. Our Jewish social relationships and our Jewish membership organizations appear to be a fact of *past Jewish communal life* that we can only look upon with nostalgia. In my own community, fewer than 30 percent of the Jewish population are affiliated with any synagogue. Membership in traditional Jewish organizations is decreasing significantly, and fewer than 20 percent of school-aged Jewish children are enrolled in *any*, and I repeat, *any*, Jewish educational activity. It is my contention that the Los Angeles Jewish community is on the cutting edge of the future, and whether we talk about positive changes for the future or symptomology which describes the ill health which we need to diagnose and treat, Los Angeles has

something to teach us about the American Jewish future.

More on the state of the American Jewish community: there are other sociological changes which have taken and are taking place in the United States and with the American Jewish community. You know about these as well as I do because they include those symptoms of dysfunction that we work with every day, including the increasing rate of family breakup, the presence of large numbers of Jews in incidents of substance abuse and the distressing increase in the spread of crime, particularly white collar crime.

In addition, there are economic facts which impact on the American Jewish community just as they do on the overall American community. It was estimated by the Council of Jewish Federations at the end of April that there were some 250,000 to 300,000 unemployed Jews. Yes, that group included recently arrived Russian Jewish immigrants, but it also included corporate executives and sub-executives—and Jewish communal professionals. We all are familiar with what can happen as a result of unemployment. Peoples' sense of identity, of achievement, and sense of control disappear, and family agency staff find more marriage breakups, spouse-beating, child abuse and suicide attempts much of which is traceable to unemployment.

At the same time as we are being pressed by these terribly complicated issues, we are experiencing serious frustration in our activities around resource development. The fund-raising of the American Jewish community is not maintaining pace, not only with the increasing incidence of pathology and service needs, but with inflation and the need to continue existing services. A major area of concern revolves around our need to improve our fund-raising ability so that existing necessary services

can indeed be maintained and give us the space and the ability to create new services and innovate approaches to address the issues of the day. Where does that leave us, the Jewish communal professionals, for the 1980's?

First of all, it seems to me that we need to look at the creation of a value system which will maintain our integrity with the Jewish communal services profession, and at the same time be relevant to the issues of the 1980's. We must examine our progressive liberal base and see how it will serve us in doing our jobs today. We must, as a matter of fact, look at the issues of the relationship between Israel and the United States—more pertinently, between Israel and the American Jewish community—and see how we can as Jews relate to the Israel of the real world of the 1980's.

We no longer find ourselves in the position of the 40's, the 50's, the 60's and even the 70's when every time Israel sneezed, the leadership and the masses in the American Jewish community not only said "gesundheit", but also handed a kleenex to Israel.

I don't mean to suggest by saying that in the 80's we are no longer in that position, that we won't or shouldn't support our fellow Jews in Israel with vigor and commitment. What I do mean to suggest is that we are now in a position for the 80's, and I think for the foreseeable future, when we will need to consider what our reaction should be to an action taken by Israel. It seems to me that our reaction more appropriately today to an Israel sneeze is again to say gesundheit, but also to consider whether a kleenex or an admonition to stay out of the rain is more helpful.

We're smart enough to recognize that there are problems which have the potential, if not the fact, of separating Israel from the American Jewish community. There are issues which can create schisms between us which we

must have courage to confront and find a way to discuss with our Israeli counterparts. The International Conference of Jewish Communal Service is one forum but we need to discover a variety of forums where we and Israelis can sit together and discover those issues which bind us together and those which separate us and create the language which permits us to discuss both kinds of issues.

While we are confronting, challenging, debating, discovering and dissenting, we must do so, it seems to me, with a set of understandings and appreciations.

1. Israel is only 35 years old.
2. Most of those 35 years and the years which went before, Israel as a nation and as a people was under siege.
3. The psychology of the founders of the state and those who are in power today emanates not only from the ideological base of Herzl's Zionism, but also from the holocaust realities of Hitler and the life traumas caused by the Grand Mufti.
4. The Israelis who make the decisions—some of which give us discomfort—are the ones to live with the consequences of those decisions.
5. The three million plus Jews who live in Israel are in fact our brothers and sisters, and our love can not be conditional.
6. And finally, my belief is that our future and the future of Israel are inextricably linked.

Second, we must examine our role with reference to Jews living in conditions of distress. Some we know about with certainty—Jews in the Soviet Union, in Ethiopia and some remnants in Arab countries. Although the prospects for their rescue and redemption are grim, their cause, their right to be

Jewish and to be free, must be our cause. A cause that goes beyond an annual demonstration or plea, but a cause that occupies a continuing high place on our conscious agendas, a cause that merits not only our emotional support but the very best of our mature leadership skills. Parenthetically, I have enormous trust and confidence in the integrity of our Jewish establishment. One of the attributes of that establishment that contributes to my sense of confidence is accountability: accountability to a communal process, accountability for behavior, and accountability for financial expenditures.

I mentioned Jews in distress in the Soviet Union, Ethiopia and Arab lands. There are other areas in the world that are potential trouble spots. These demand our sensitive and continuing awareness and monitoring. We need to reserve judgment before jumping to conclusions, and yet we must be prepared to act assertively in alliance with our Jewish colleagues when circumstances require that assistance.

A word about our political activity: whether in behalf of Israel, Jews in distress or an improved approach to the resolution of complicated social welfare issues. We, as professional communal workers, can no longer afford to be political innocents. We live in a political world and life's decisions are influenced by the variety of political systems. At the same time, we must resist the temptation of identifying with partisan politics. Our role as communal worker and leader requires a constituency that cuts across every segment of community and political point of view.

Third is the question of how I want to deal with our role. Twenty-eight years ago, my self-perceived role defined by my education, was that of an enabler, a facilitator, a provider of information to decision-makers, a diagnostician and a planner.

I still perceive of myself as an enabler, a facilitator, an information provider, and a consensus builder, and yet, my friends, the day has arrived when the Jewish communal service professionals must also perceive of themselves as leaders. Whatever the philosophical value base that we determine for ourselves for the 1980's, we must be in a position to give leadership to the maintenance and continuity of the American Jewish community. I believe we are leaders, not only of our profession, but of our communities and we must find a way to assert our leadership without losing our constituency, without, in fact, distancing ourselves from the lay leadership of the American Jewish community. The issue of leadership leads us necessarily to the issue of the status of the professional. Far too frequently when we examine our status, we look only at the externals. How much is our salary? How are we viewed by lay leadership? What kind of parties do we get invited to? How do we compare to other Jewish communal professionals like the rabbi? Those are only the externals. There are other questions which we must have the courage to address. There is the question of standards. What do we stand for? How do we hold ourselves accountable to performance standards? How do we hold ourselves accountable to the goals of our agencies? And, yes, is our compensation appropriate for that which is expected of us and that which we do.

I commented earlier on the changes that have taken place in the nature of lay leadership. Many of our leaders have a management orientation. That orientation demands a set of expectations which apply not only to their own businesses, but to their communal enterprise as well. That means that we must develop for ourselves, forgive the expression, a "bottom line consciousness",

a set of standards to which we must hold ourselves accountable.

The question is therefore:

"How secure are we in discussing these issues with our leadership?" We must be prepared to discuss not only our salaries, our long hours, our commitment and devotion, our philosophy and values. We must also be prepared to discuss our commitment to achievement, our accountability to a set of performance standards, and have our compensation and status relate to those measurements as well.

That brings me to the next issue, namely, our relationships with lay leadership. How comfortable are we in dealing with power? How comfortable and how effective are we in dealing with money? Our lay leadership does represent power and is used to dealing with power, to using power whether in their own profession or occupation, in their own voluntary activities, and certainly in the political arena. If *we* are to be effective—then we must be able to understand and to deal with power if, in fact, not use power ourselves. And similarly with money. Our lay people *must* be affluent, and we must be comfortable with that affluence and not view it as something which is dirty or dysfunctional.

Next, when we talk about the Jewish communal professional, we need to talk about the knowledge base. First, Jewish knowledge. Who are we? Where do we as the Jewish people come from? What do we as the Jewish people stand for? What portions of our philosophical framework derive from our Jewish past and are *unchangeable*? What do we know about our history? What do we know about our laws and how do we make up for our deficiencies?

Then, there is a whole knowledge base and skills which must be held by us, not limited to the skills of social work but certainly including those skills. What

kind of knowledge and ability do we need and do we have to understand in developing and utilizing communal processes?

Now I must deal with an issue which for me *is*, but shouldn't be, uncomfortable and yet at the same time will impact on our ability to contribute to shaping of the future of the American Jewish community and to our status as a profession. I don't have the statistics, and yet from observation, both as a Federation executive and as a close observer of one school of Jewish communal service, I am struck by the observation that our population is increasingly being dominated by women. So that I'm not misunderstood, I believe that women have a critical role to play in Jewish communal service. I believe that women need to enjoy the same opportunities for advancement in the profession as men. At the same time, my friends, I would not want the field to be seen as a women's field as distinct from a field where women can achieve. That issue may revolve around money and salary, it may revolve around perceived status, but it is an issue that I believe we must be concerned with and deal with.

The role of Jewish communal service in the years ahead is going to be a very complicated one. I remember believing that Jewish communal service professionals did not get ulcers. I no longer believe that. There probably is a higher incidence of hypertension among Jewish communal executives than in any other comparable field. We appear to be part of the creation of a set of circumstances which has the capacity to consume us, the Jewish communal professionals. I have my own views about tenure of professionals that I won't burden you with today. I do believe, however, that we have an enormous contribution to make in working toward the creative continuity of the Jewish community and the Jewish people. I have no

great sense of confidence that we know how to do it, that we have the capacity to do what is required. I would caution us not to be overburdened by questions of status and to be much more concerned with issues of understanding and performance.

One thing we must do—we must have the courage to evaluate programs and services in reference to their avowed objectives and the objectives of the community.

We must have the courage to make choices and opt for the programs that will contribute to the well-being of individuals and the overall health of our community. We must understand that there are no sacred cows other than the continuity of the Jewish people in an organized community. That Jewish people must be Jewishly educated, Jewishly caring and Jewishly connected to all Jews everywhere.

Several closing remarks. First, we need to take enormous pride in the accomplishments and the achievements of our predecessors and, yes, of ourselves. We need to recognize the enormous contribution our field has made to Jewish life. The state of the Jewish communal enterprise, with all of its shortcomings, with all of the *shrying*, the yelling, the complaining, is an extraordinarily healthy one. We have built institutions and organizations, we have developed an infrastructure, we provide a quality of service that is second to none on this continent and we need to be enormously proud of that achievement.

Second, those of us who are here this evening are only representative of the thousands of Jewish communal professionals who work day-in-and-day-out in every community in North America. That work has a sense of commitment and devotion and enormous production that we also need to be proud of.

Third, now what do we need to do? We need to look honestly and seriously

at problems and concerns ahead. We, each of us, in our own way, need to examine what our specific and unique role must be in shaping the future of our own community and of the larger Jewish society. And then, together, we must look professionally, organizationally, how we can develop a map to a large extent a Jewish communal map, for that future. That map will be based on our history, on our prior experiences, on the philosophical base and on a different set of expectations of our Jewish community and of us.

We need to recognize that there is a distance between our value base and that of our lay leadership. It is our responsibility to recognize this and initiate the process of bridging that distance. Bridges have two-way traffic. We therefore must move ourselves and help move our leadership, so that together we can construct a value orientation more pertinent to the 1980's.

As professional leaders, we need to join with our colleagues in Jewish education and diagnose the educational needs of our future. We have put the major portion of our support and energy into the day schools—for a small minority of our children. Day schools are important, but they will not produce the mass of Jewishly educated, Jewishly committed and Jewishly caring population necessary for our continuity. Supplementary education must be reviewed, renewed and reshaped. That is where most of future leadership will acquire their Jewish knowledge.

Finally, if I believe anything about the requirements of the Jewish communal professional for the rest of the eighties, it must be that we are obligated to give sound, intelligent, considered, understanding, sensitive and risk-taking leadership to our communities. Leadership without those adjectives and the tens of adjectives that I left out will not achieve the essential objectives. But leadership

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which reflects the needs of our community, which is based on an understanding of our constituency, and which is tied to a value-base not only for our-

selves but for the North American Jewish community—that kind of leadership is the attribute which we must strive to achieve in the years ahead.