

Jewish Identity and Agency Function*

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Our agencies have been established to render specific service function . . . in response to certain specific human needs. Those functions have not, up to now, included the specific mission of strengthening Jewish identity. That objective has been poorly served because it has been dragged in through the back door of agency function, as an appendage, instead of being recognized as a function of primary importance to the future of Jewish life in this country.

THIS paper has two objectives: 1. To examine why, in the face of an acknowledged crisis of Jewish identity and survival, there has been no significant mobilization of effort, nationally or locally, to deal with that crisis.

2. To suggest new ways of thinking about the crisis so that we may be able to develop more effective approaches to deal with it.†

The Paradox

The entire problem of effective Jewish identity programming is characterized by a striking paradox. On the one hand, there is general recognition of the problem and grave concern about its implications. The 1976 National Jewish population study confirmed an intermarriage rate of 32 percent which, combined with zero population growth, suggested a crisis of survival. This concern has been expressed in paper after paper at national gatherings of lay and professional leaders, and in numerous local Board and staff institutes. On the other hand, there has been a remarkable absence of organized and sustained activity to deal with the problem. "Re-

markable" because it is so contrary to the usual Jewish communal response to recognized crises, particularly on the part of Federations. The experiences with aid to Israel, the rescue of the remnants of our people and the integration of Soviet immigrants speak for themselves.

I believe that there are three major reasons for the paradox:

- I The complexity of the problem.
- II Some misconceptions about current programs.
- III The emphasis on Jewish components in existing agencies, and particularly in family service agencies.

I. The Complexity of the Problem

Although the phrase "Jewish Identity" is now in constant use, experience in many communities and agencies indicates that the general understanding of the phrase tends to be naive and simplistic. One rarely encounters any clear discussion of what is meant by Jewish identity or of what we would like to achieve in dealing with it. The problem is so vast, and is so deeply rooted in societal factors beyond our control, that there is a tendency to feel overwhelmed by its size and complexity. For one thing, the people who have the problem are not affiliated, rarely come into the framework of the Jewish communal

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† I must make it clear at the outset that the views expressed in this paper do not in any way reflect views or policies of the Council.

system, do not ask for help, and therefore are not available to our agencies and their traditional ways of giving help. There is very little experience to guide us in how to reach them, to say nothing about how to influence them.

For the purposes of this discussion, I'd like to suggest that from the point of view of Jewish communal services,¹ the objectives should be as follows:

1. To expose people to Jewish experience of any kind (religious, secular, cultural, emotional) which results in their having more positive feelings about themselves as Jews, and
2. To have these feelings so strongly internalized that they result in some form of positive Jewish activity within families and within the Jewish community and
3. To have the families wish to pass these feelings on to their children.

II. Some Misconceptions

One reason for the failure to mobilize action to deal with the identity problem has been a number of prevalent misconceptions about the effectiveness of existing programs.

(a) *Jewish Education*

In recent years, the concern about the weakening sense of Jewish identity has caused a tremendous increase in community support for Jewish education. There has been a phenomenal increase in the number of all-day schools, and studies show that graduates of all-day schools rarely intermarry. These developments are to be welcomed, and we can all hope that the trend will continue. At the same time, the trend may be creating a false sense of security. Too many people equate increases in ex-

penditures with solutions of problems. It is necessary to face the fact that no matter how fine a job is being done by Jewish education, it reaches only those who come into the educational system through synagogues or otherwise. It does not reach that large and growing number of Jews who do not come into the system.

(b) *Jewish Family Life Education*

There is also a great deal of misconception about the Jewish family life education programs of family agencies, particularly in relation to the objective of strengthening Jewish identity. There is the impression that these programs deal with the issues of Jewish identity per se, but that is rarely the case. While they occasionally include references to Jewish values and observance, they focus primarily and appropriately upon family agency concerns with problems of family stability, parent-child relationships and the prevention of family tensions and breakdown. Furthermore, they are addressed primarily to Jewish organizations, either of men or women, and rarely to family units as such. When they do involve family units, it is unusual for the focus to be around questions of identity. This is not to be taken as a criticism of family agencies. Their functions have always been therapeutic and rehabilitative, and their staffs are highly skilled in relation to their established functions.

(c) *Jewish Centers and Jewish Content*

There is a great deal of discussion throughout the country about the adequacy of "Jewish content" in community centers. I have been exposed to many of these discussions, and have been struck by the fact that they almost always have to do with how much there is, rather than with the nature of the programs and whether they are effective. Many Centers do have consistent policies of Jewish programming and often develop programs of considerable interest. In

¹ The references in this paper to "Jewish communal services" and "agencies" are not meant to include any agencies or programs in the field of formal Jewish education.

relation to this, however, there are two points to be made:

(1) There is a real question as to whether many of these programs have the effect projected in this paper, namely whether they create an internalization of Jewish feeling which affects the life style in any significant way, and

(2) They also do not reach the people who do not normally come into the Jewish communal system.

III. The Focus on Jewish Components

I believe that a third major reason for the failure to deal more effectively with the identity problem is what might be called well intentioned but misplaced emphasis. I refer to the efforts of a group of professional leaders who have been making a concerted effort to influence Jewish communal services toward more positive Jewish objectives and programs. That group, exemplified by the brilliant writings of men like Drs. Gerald Bubis and Bernard Reisman, have expressed a viewpoint consisting of the following elements.

(a) Jewish life in this country is at a critical point because of certain demographic factors—the weakening sense of Jewish identity, the high rate of intermarriage, zero population growth, and related elements.

(b) It therefore becomes the duty of Jewish communal services to deal with this new condition. These services must change their priorities, functions and programs so as to become instruments to halt and perhaps even reverse the assimilatory trend. They should become Judaizing instruments, using their resources and skills to strengthen the sense of Jewish identity.

(c) Since the essential vehicle for creating and maintaining Jewish identity is the Jewish family, the Jewish fam-

ily agency has a special responsibility to come to grips with the problem.

It is also of interest to note that while these views have been expressed with special vigor in the last ten years, they have been consistently stated in the proceedings of the Conference of Jewish Communal Service and elsewhere since the early part of the century. It is therefore pertinent to ask, in view of the general current recognition of the seriousness of the problem, and in view of the historic thinking, exhortation and pressure, why has there been so little effective response?

One answer which is often given is that the problem lies in the absence of Jewish commitment on the part of agency professionals. This may have been true years ago, but it is no longer true, but even if it were, it would not be the major consideration. The crucial issues are those of function and professional role.

The fact is that the attempt to make agencies more Jewish has been associated with an ideological approach which makes inappropriate assumptions about agency function and is often in conflict with sound professional practice. Although this is consistently denied, the record speaks for itself. For example, Dr. Bubis has stated the following position in recent publications:

It is not enough for the Jewish communal worker to be approached by the client for personal problem-solving. He should also be seen as a representative of Judaism and its traditions. "The right of the client to self-determination and actualizing of personal potentialities are shibboleths with the force of dogma."² "Jewish societal rights and expectations must come to be included in the agenda

² Gerald Bubis, "Intermarriage, the Rabbi, and the Jewish Communal Worker" in KTAV Publishing House, Inc., New York, *Serving the Jewish Family*, Gerald Bubis, ed., 1977, p. 72.

of professional, agency, and organizational concerns."³

Since the agency is in business for the purpose of helping to ensure Jewish continuity, it must have a conscious policy against intermarriage and for in-group marriage, and must develop strategies which carry out this policy. Of course, this approach must not conflict with sound professional principles, and with sufficient concern and application, it can come to be a natural way of working.⁴

"There must be then, an articulation of Jewish expectation and concern transmitted to the client. The criterion cannot be only what is good for individual Jews, but must also include the criterion of what is good for the Jewish community."⁵

Dr. Bernard Reisman states quite unequivocally that not only is a change in professional ideology necessary, but that it must include a willingness on the part of the worker to be ideologically directive.

Understandably, this isn't easy to do given the field's long time commitment to the principle of non-directiveness and the fact that it is intertwined with other basic values such as client self-determination and moral relativism. It is important to point out that while the family life education function has been closely allied to social work . . . it is a different service than clinical case work and requires an ideology commensurate with its functions.⁶

It is to be noted that the ideological position so well expressed by Drs. Bubis and Reisman rests on the primary assumption that Jewish agencies are in the business of ensuring Jewish continuity. This assumption is not correct, and has

no basis in historical fact. In this country, agencies were established to meet specific needs of families and individuals at different times. The functions of these agencies have often changed as conditions and needs changed. They have not been seen, nor are they now seen, as instruments of Jewish continuity which has always been seen as the responsibility of the religious and educational sectors of the community. Therefore, the attempt to change agencies into Judaizing instruments is artificial, unreal and contrary to sociological fact. This helps to explain why the ideological emphasis in relation to agencies has had so little influence.

It is also an unfortunate fact that the ideological emphasis is indeed contrary to well established principles of social work. Drs. Bubis and Reisman challenge such principles as non-directiveness and self-determination, but the profession has not, up to this point, shown any disposition to agree with them, and for very good reasons. It is a commonplace of knowledge about people and the helping process that accepting help stems from the client's perception of what his problem is, his desire for help with that problem, and the assumption that the agency is in a position to provide that help. Commitment and ideology in the worker do not change how people ask for and take help from agencies and other people. Community centers and family services have been established for generations and offer certain kinds of services, with people coming to these agencies for what they understand those services to be. The agencies do not offer help around feelings of Jewishness per se, nor do clients perceive that as an area for which they may seek help.

However, even if there were no conflict between ideology and professionalism, and even if agencies intro-

³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴ Gerald Bubis, "The Jewish Component in Jewish Communal Service," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Spring 1980, p. 232.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 233-34.

⁶ Bernard Reisman, Ph.D., "The Emerging Jewish Family", Institute for Jewish Life, New York.

duced Jewish components that were valid and relevant, the impact on the general problem of Jewish identity would still be minimal. I venture to say that in the family service field, probably less than 5% of all cases would professionally merit the introduction of Jewish elements. I would suggest further that even in those cases, the effect on the sense of Jewish identity of the individuals involved would be insignificant.

What, then, are the implications? Many of us who accept and support the ideological objectives articulated by Bubis and Reisman, but cannot accept the implications for unsound professional practice, have thought about this dichotomy, and on behalf of that group, I should like to offer a different way of looking at the problem—a new concept of function.

A New Concept on Function

Based upon a long experience with many agencies and communities, I am convinced that the problem of the weakening sense of Jewish identity, and the need for an effective and continuous program, requires a new concept of function. This conclusion is based on the assumption that the nature of the problem requires a new sense of role and a special combination of knowledge and skills. It seems to me that we have never really faced up to the crucial fact that the objective of strengthening the sense of Jewish identity involves a fundamental difference in the traditional concept of the professional role. The new concept of role includes ideological elements which are not normally present in the usual and accepted definition of what the professional in the Jewish communal agency is expected to do, and what he or she is trained to do. Many professionals would consider such a role to be in conflict with the non-ideological stance of any profession. It means bringing people back into a relationship

with their ethnic identity and all that that implies. It implies cultural objectives which transcend the personal problems of the client and which attempt to create in the client the cultural objectives of the professional. It therefore can never be comfortable within the framework of the traditional service agency, which begins with fundamentally different assumptions and objectives. It means that the professional is placed in the same ideological realm as the Jewish educator. But just as no one questions the valid role of the Jewish educator if his objectives are clearly stated and he is professionally qualified, there will be no challenge to the new philosophical stance if it is clearly articulated and incorporates the necessary knowledge and skills. The latter will be a combination of education, casework, group dynamics and therapy, extensive Jewish knowledge and deep ethnic commitment, and how to combine all of these into an integrated workable approach to people. In other words, the ideological mission will be translated into an acceptable professional framework.

The recognition that the ideological objective must be clearly stated and accepted eliminates the possibility of conflict with traditional professional principles. From the point of view of the client, there will be no confusion about what service will be offered or received. Perhaps of greatest importance, for the first time ambivalent Jews will be offered a helping approach which will deal openly and directly with their problem of Jewish identity.

Because we have never reached out to people in relation to their sense of ethnic identity as a special function, there will be doubt and uncertainty about this. But on every hand there is evidence that in the current cultural climate there is a hunger for ethnic roots and relatedness. Our outreach efforts will have to be based on a sensitive

understanding of where people are in this complex psycho-cultural phenomenon and not on where some of us think they ought to be. But that will be only one aspect of the challenge. There will be any number of questions of methodology, knowledge, and skill, but we will have shifted the entire matter of identity programming into the professional arena, where the focus will be on how to get the job done.

At this point, I wish to emphasize, as strongly as I can, that a shift of the issue into the professional framework should not obscure the fact that the entire proposal of a new function rests on a foundation of deep and firm conviction about the importance of Jewish life and its survival, and our responsibility to deal constructively with that need.

Research and Experimentation

To bring a problem into the professional arena is to base what we do on sound knowledge, usable data, tested methods and verified assumptions. The new function will therefore have to be tested with sound research and experimentation. We need answers to a host of questions, such as: What is the nature of the potential client group? What age groups should be our primary targets? What are effective outreach methods? What are the best ways to program? Which approaches work and which do not? What combination of personality knowledge and skills works best? What should be the criteria of "success"? Not only will we need the answers to these and other questions to do the job, but also to train a new generation of professionals to administer the new function.

The research and experimental approach will move us away from our traditional focus on existing agencies and their functions, to a focus on what is needed to accomplish the new objective. Does the needed combination of knowledge and skills exist anywhere? If not,

how can it be created? Should the new approaches be lodged in existing agencies, and if so, in which ones? If not, what type of new structure is required? That is, the focus is shifted to a professional arena in which there is total agreement on ideology and objective, and in which knowledge and skill offer the best hope of progress.

Summary and Conclusion

To stress what I think are the key issues facing us in dealing with the challenge of strengthening Jewish identity, first and foremost, we must rid ourselves of inappropriate assumptions about who and what we are, and about what we can and cannot do. Our agencies have been established to render specific service functions and those functions have been established by our communities and supported by them in response to certain specific human needs. Those functions have not, up to now, included the specific mission of strengthening Jewish identity. That objective has been poorly served because it has been dragged in through the back door of agency function, as an appendage, instead of being recognized as a function of primary importance to the future of Jewish life in this country. As such, it must be understood and accepted as a major objective, and must be developed professionally as we have done with all other agency functions, in a framework of knowledge and skill. That framework is intrinsic to all professional activities, but has been sadly lacking in the area of Jewish identity. With such a framework, the tension between ideology and professionalism will disappear. The sense of ethnic mission will then stand on its own feet, not only as a valid professional objective and process, but as a vital major effort to insure a healthy survival of Jewish life in this country.