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Shaping the Jewish Communal Agenda— The Professional Role*

SANFORD SOLENDER

Executive Consultant, Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, New York

Agenda building involves hard choices which means that some issues are not included each year. An agenda which includes everything is a pious expression of hope which will have little practical effect on the utilization of communal energies and resources. . .

. . . agenda shaping involves judgments by knowledgeable people who are prepared to take responsibility for their decisions, to bear the approval and disapproval which comes with this, and to assure the initiatives in implementing action on the whole agenda.

As predictable as the cycle of the calendar is the reality that from year to year the Jewish communal agenda must be reexamined and redefined. One year's agenda cannot be assumed to be suitable for the next in view of the dynamic sweep of human events. It is appropriate therefore to review the principles which should guide agenda-making and to test them as applied to this year's realities.

The role of the Jewish community professional in shaping the Jewish communal agenda is the focus of this discussion. Is the professional but an agent who invokes and guides a process by which others set the agenda or should the professional be a principal in this process? Past experience suggests a strong predisposition by professionals to the former role, viewing themselves primarily as resources for others who decide the agenda. This assumption must be reconsidered.

The combination of commitment to Jewish purpose, special knowledge and skill in practice, and intimate daily experience with people and communities equips the Jewish professional to be much more than a process expediter. There is an opportunity for the profes-

sional to make a substantive contribution to the process of decision-making through identifying areas of concern, clarifying issues, projecting alternative positions and their implications, and offering professional recommendations. This is far from the perspective of the professional as a technician who facilitates decision-making by authoritative groups.

It is appropriate also to consider organized ways in which professionals as a group can contribute to shaping the Jewish agenda. In the flow of agenda-making within Federations, as in social agencies generally, good practice provides that there be opportunity for the professional staff as a group to consider the agenda. Out of such staff deliberation can come recommendations to be conveyed from the staff to the decision-makers. Moreover, where community circumstances make it feasible, the professional organizations of Jewish community workers can develop proposals for formal consideration in shaping agenda.

The traditional view of the professional role in this process, particularly on the part of professionals themselves, has been too static, too narrow, and too timid. This is not an issue of the *right* of professionals to participate in decision-making; it is recognition that professionals are a valuable community

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resource whose input will enhance the quality of Jewish communal action.

Experience in shaping Jewish communal agendas suggests the following principles for use by both professionals and lay leaders in the process:

1. A disciplined plan for developing the communal agenda is the only appropriate alternative to improvised, opportunistic and emergency-oriented decision-making. Maintenance of firm control of agenda building by policy-making bodies (the Federation, the community relations agency, or other designated groups) is the only means of assuring an organized approach to priority setting. Without such planfulness, the community agenda will result from the most recently and most persistently applied pressure, instead of from an analytical review of the options at a given point in time.

2. Effective Jewish communal agendas are dynamic—they evolve and change to reflect altered community circumstances and needs. A static, rarely revised list of priorities and programs may result from a process which fails to deal with the concerns of all groups, is not nourished by good communication, and does not address the hard choices which come with priority setting.

3. Sound communal agendas contain only the number and quality of issues which can be acted upon effectively. Comprehensive agendas which by the cunning use of sub-headings actually exclude nothing are a futile exercise. If agendas are to be working documents, they must match action realities.

4. Jewish communal agendas should address broad concerns and issues which have a large impact on the Jewish community. They should meet the test of *community*: that their component items are important to the survival and functioning of the community *qua* community, as distinguished from those that reflect narrow, particularistic interests. Jewish communal agendas should respect the democratic pluralism in Jewish life. They should reflect a sensitive regard for ideological and denominational differences and be built around communal consensus and common ground. Agendas should link the special interests of particular groups to broader Jewish issues and concerns.

5. Jewish communal agendas should deal with the interrelationship of American and Israeli Jewry. The hard questions in this linkage should be handled, with provision for con-

structive participation by each in the life of the other.

6. Agendas should reflect adequately the integration of general American and Jewish concerns. The Jewish commitment to social justice and civil rights and the stake of American Jewry in the resolution of general social policy matters requires that the agenda include Jewish communal responsibility for larger social issues.

7. Jewish communal agenda-making should resist the temptation to adopt a single issue orientation. The fate of Israel, world peace, and Jewish education, for example, are high priority matters for the Jewish community. But the communal agenda and communal policy must not be determined exclusively by one concern, however vital and important. The world is too complex and the interplay of social commitments is too profound for a simplistic approach which reduces policy-making to a single criterion. Sophisticated agenda shaping must give appropriate weight to every dimension of Jewish concern and blend them in a mix which takes account of all the areas of Jewish responsibility. The most dramatic illustration of this point is the contention that Jewish people should endorse candidates, public officials, or organizations having a reactionary social orientation on domestic issues because they support Israel. As critical as it is for friends of Israel to be encouraged, compromising support for needed domestic social policies is a price which cannot be paid for this.

Selection of the components of the Jewish communal agenda involves a number of considerations which must weigh heavily in judgments made by professional staff as well as officers. The overriding value which must animate the choice is the bearing of given issues, problems and programs on the survival, continuity, and enrichment of the life of the Jewish people. Elements being weighed for inclusion in the agenda must be considered first against this standard. Within this context, priority must be accorded to the defense of those Jews whose physical survival is in jeopardy, as for example, those in Ethiopia or the Soviet Union. The timeliness of issues is relevant, especially in relation to events and developments

which precipitate an immediacy of concern and give special impetus to them. The concurrence of critical events and impending action by governmental authorities on a problem all bear on the judgment about it. United States support for Israel, Jewish involvement in the Warsaw Ghetto-uprising anniversary, opposition to the sale of the F-15 planes to Saudi Arabia, and action against the Nazi march in Skokie, Illinois are examples of such interaction.

The convergence, nationally or internationally, of action on an issue by various groups and selection of the subject as a priority by the organizations which are central to action on it, can materially affect the issue's inclusion on the agenda. The choice also is influenced by historical perspectives on the matter, the natural evolution of the issue and its maturation to a point of readiness for action. This is especially apparent with issues such as the decline of the Jewish birthrate, intermarriage, family breakdown and the single-parent family.

Finally, a concatenation of circumstances in a particular community may precipitate a given issue to the point of action, making its inclusion on that community's agenda imperative. Illustrative of this would be a proposal before a city council or state legislature to eliminate tax considerations extended to religious bodies, a projected employment policy which would seriously diminish or wipe out the possibility of the selection of Jewish candidates for jobs, a proposed local policy on the allocation of public funds for social programs in which the criteria would practically eliminate Jewish neighborhoods or clients, or an official recommendation to congress to cut the level of assistance to Israel.

It is useful to test this conceptual framework by using it to formulate a Jewish communal agenda for this time.

Allowing for the deficiency that this is prepared by the writer alone and lacks the interaction of persons and organizations representing various viewpoints and perspectives, here is one approach to a contemporary agenda:

1. The first item is that of rescue of the Jews in the Soviet Union, Ethiopia, and possibly some South American countries. Here the element of physical and ethnic survival is paramount.

2. The second component is Israel: safeguarding the security and development of the Jewish state through influencing American policy and assistance, countering Arab and other anti-Israel propaganda, and interpreting Israel to the American people. This agenda item should provide opportunities for constructive criticism of Israel policies in relation to the West Bank, the Palestinians, the Sephardim, and other issues. This, of course, includes support for Israeli campaigns: UJA, Bonds, etc.

3. The third agenda item is the furtherance of the quality of Jewish life, especially in the field of Jewish education and culture. Intermarriage and problems of the Jewish family are included here as well.

4. Jewish community-building is the fourth agenda subject—steps to encompass the whole community (all ideological and geographical elements) in the Jewish communal structure (through neighborhood as well as citywide bodies), to enhance the ability of the community to achieve consensus, and to strengthen its capacity for unified action. This includes support for the Federation campaign and for neighborhood preservation programs.

5. The fifth agenda item is the furtherance of human rights and human welfare: safeguarding civil rights in America and in the world generally, and safeguarding the social welfare of Americans, particularly in relation to the regression in government responsibility which has been the trademark of the Reagan administration.

6. The sixth and final element in the agenda is the striving for peace, disarmament and the elimination of the possibility of nuclear warfare.

Many will criticize this agenda for its omissions. Where, they will ask, is fighting anti-Semitism, opposing neo-Nazism, anti-holocaust education, developing TV and communications, and the

recruitment and training of Jewish leaders. Agenda building involves hard choices which means that some issues are not included each year. An agenda which includes everything is a pious expression of hope which will have little practical effect on the utilization of communal energies and resources. Omission of an item does not mean it is ignored by the community; inclusion suggests the points of emphasis for a stipulated period.

Others will contend that this agenda is too full, that it fails to make enough exclusions to provide a bill of fare that is practical and actionable. This is a reasonable position and must not be denigrated. But agenda shaping involves judgments by knowledgeable people who are prepared to take responsibility for their decisions, to bear the approval and disapproval which comes with this, and to assure the initiatives in implementing action on the whole agenda.

An active professional role in shaping the Jewish communal agenda gives rise to many practical problems. For professional workers this can mean anguished dilemmas and painful choices.

The most obvious conflict arises where the professional disagrees with the thrust of positions which are part of the Jewish communal agenda. What if the worker disagrees with support for an all-out program of West Bank settlement, non-representation at a Warsaw ghetto anniversary in Poland, or advocacy of federal assistance to non-public schools? The worker can express contrary views in preparatory staff discussions and can help to ensure that both sides of the issue are included in background material and in discussions with leaders. But when an official stand has been taken and is part of the Jewish communal agenda, the worker is obligated to implement faithfully this action. Where the worker is unable to do so, and especially where such dif-

ferences are frequent, it can become untenable for the worker to continue in the job. Most workers can function in a situation where they disapprove of some actions but where the preponderance of positions are congenial to them.

Professionals also confront difficult choices where they wish to become public advocates of positions, especially where these are at variance with the official community stand. As formal spokesmen for their organization, they can represent only the views approved officially. Difficulty arises over the fact that workers, especially on the executive level, cannot speak personally without appearing to be talking for their agency. The best efforts to clarify that they are acting as individuals frequently are futile and, without wishing it to be the case, they are assumed to be agency spokesmen. Workers often must decline to sponsor public declarations or actions to avoid this misunderstanding. Workers also face the fact that advocating unpopular stands can result in serious relationship problems with community leaders and groups, with adverse effects on working relationships. Workers may find it necessary, for example, to avoid public identification with the Peace Now movement or the Gush Emunim group in Israel for this reason. These problems also can arise in relation to lay officers of the community. There is need to develop community policies which safeguard better than at present the freedom of professionals and lay leaders to act as individuals without compromising their communities. It should be remembered, however, that there is a broad scope of issues about which these tensions do not arise and where public action by professionals poses no such problems.

There are sensitive questions in respect to the support of political parties and candidates for office. It is well-established policy that Jewish commu-

nity bodies do not support political parties and candidates. Community structures with broad communal involvement must embrace adherents of all political groups. For the professional worker, and for the elected Jewish communal officer, the problem is no less complicated. It is difficult for such people to separate their personal and official community behavior in the political arena. This may require abstinence from public endorsement or public action on behalf of candidates or parties. More recently, the political action committee technique has eased this problem. PAC's have opened an acceptable avenue of political participation for professionals as well as lay officers.

Finally, there is the matter of the forms of public action available to professional workers. It is expected that actions taken by professionals will be dignified, respectful of the rights of others, and effective in communicating stands. Workers often are asked to sign statements, sponsor ads, march in parades, participate in demonstrations, and join in militant actions (stoppages, traffic interruptions, etc.). Those which are community sponsored, like a march for Soviet Jewry or Israel Independence Day celebrations, present no problems for professionals. But there are sensitive

judgments to be made in regard to other actions. Professionals need to evaluate the appropriateness of various action proposals, bearing in mind the difficulty of separating their personal from their official roles and the effect of particular actions on their community relationships.

The essential thrust with respect to the role of the professional in implementing the Jewish communal agenda should be to maximize the worker's participation and leadership as an agency staff person, as a member of a profession, and as a citizen. Cautions are intended to address the problems encountered in practice, but not to detract from emphasis on the vigor of the professional's role.

Shaping the Jewish communal agenda is a critical task for the central community organization and one in which the role of the professional is pivotal. It is the worker upon whom falls responsibility for implementation which is planful and creative. Administered thus, shaping the Jewish communal agenda can be a constant experience in widening community horizons, enlarging community involvement, and heightening the quality of community life.