

A Further Exchange Between Charles Miller and Bernard Reisman

*From Charles Miller to
Bernard Reisman*

I was most pleased to receive your thoughtful letter (Fall, 1983). I have sorely missed the opportunity to discuss these issues in depth face to face. They are major issues in Jewish life, and I am distressed to find so little interest, nationally and locally, in pursuing the matter in consistent and thoughtful ways. We need a kind of Rand Corporation approach to the problem of Jewish identity and with a focus on what to do about it. The entire question is pervaded by myths, inappropriate assumptions, an enormous volume of hot air, lip service, declarations of good intentions, and an almost complete absence of significant achievements.

First, let me say that I think you and Gerry Bubis have made a basic contribution to the field of Jewish communal service by focusing professional attention upon the issue. That, to me, is more important than any difference we may have about specifics.

You are quite right that I did not make sufficiently clear that my primary concern is the entire field of Jewish communal service (excluding formal Jewish education), and that the paper was focused on all services. I also should have made clearer that I was not in any way criticizing or objecting to any efforts in the field of Jewish family service to become more Jewish in objectives and programs. On the contrary. What I am saying is that the efforts of Jewish family agencies in this area of concern are, and will continue to be, minor, and will not in the long run significantly affect enough people in enough ways. I have stated my reasons for this in the paper, and I can tell you that 2 former presi-

dents of the National Jewish Family and Children's Association support my conclusion. If I'm wrong about my 5% figure, and the figure should be higher, it still doesn't change the basic conditions and configuration of forces.

One of the things that comes through consistently in your writings and in those of Gerry Bubis (and again in your letter) is your convictions that the field of Jewish family service should be more what you and Gerry think it ought to be. You both seem to be convinced that if only people would agree with you all would be well. But change in an area of professional endeavor doesn't occur that way. The history of all professions, including social work, illustrates that there has to be a consensus around objectives, knowledge and skill. You and Gerry have made a fundamentally constructive contribution in the way you have helped to focus attention on a new objective which is more in keeping with the needs and future of Jewish life in this country. But you then proceed to try to inject the new objective into a field steeped in the older objectives, with no significant knowledge or skill on how to implement the newer objective. Furthermore, the communities by and large support the older objectives and approach, and with few exceptions rarely even consider identity building as a major objective in family service. I speak from experience and from contact with hundreds of decision-makers in all parts of the country. Even the community center, which almost always expresses an objective of Jewish survival and enrichment in its constitution, is not seen that way by its leadership. Several years ago a survey of the attitudes of Center leadership regarding executive qualifications revealed that Jewish knowledge

JOURNAL OF JEWISH COMMUNAL SERVICE

and commitment were near the bottom of the list.

I begin from a framework of *what is* and what is possible to achieve, assuming that we both have the same objective. It is not helpful to discuss the problem without reference to the realities of Jewish communal life. All change comes from people, and mostly from the people, lay and professional, we think of as "leaders." It is that group we must influence, and it is a commonplace of professional knowledge and wisdom that high-minded declarations of purpose do not create change. Furthermore, the current realities of Jewish communal life, and the outlook for the next few years, are not encouraging. We are facing an unprecedented situation which is occupying the full attention of Jewish communities, making it that much more difficult to try to focus attention on basic changes in attitudes and services. That situation consists of the following major factors:

1. *The stabilization of income.* With the exception of a small number of sunbelt communities, we now have, for the first time, what appears to be a stabilization of Jewish communal income from campaigns. Up to this time, local services have benefitted from a rising curve of income, but no more. I know you are aware of the trend to policies forbidding a lowering of the percentage to UJA, with the result of budget reductions in local services.

2. A younger generation which is less related to Jewish tradition, religion, Holocaust, and community, tends to focus more on local needs, but contributes not at all or on a much lower level.

3. Increasing needs of an ever growing population of elderly, at the same time that public funds are stable or declining.

4. A host of new problems—the frightening weakening of the sense of Jewish identity, the increase in inter-

marriage, declining synagogue and Jewish affiliation, mobility and geographic dispersal, etc.

5. In the face of these trends, 80 percent of Jewish campaign income coming from 20 percent of the contributors who are more concerned with overseas rather than local needs.

6. A trend toward new budget approaches, all of which express ways of lessening support to local services (I do not include Jewish education, but that area will also soon be facing the same problem) and a new focus on priorities, which again is most often an expression of the pressure to reduce and/or eliminate services.

Thus, the realities are creating a preoccupation with current needs and how to maintain what we have, and there is very little patience with such issues as the Jewishness of agencies. Almost all of the discussion around the issue is among professionals, as it was at our table at the Concord. It rarely occurs, except in very minor ways, among the people who make the major decisions affecting dimensions and patterns of service.

There is another group of facts which helped to influence my thinking. It constitutes another aspect of this entire problem which is rarely referred to openly, but which I constantly encounter throughout the field of Jewish family service. In recent years, and particularly since the national Jewish population study of 1976, the issue of Jewish identity has come to the fore, particularly in papers at conferences, publications, special institutes on Jewish components, etc. A climate has developed in which there is an element of "good guys and bad guys," the good guys being the paper writers, wrapping themselves in a mantle of virtue, and insisting that if you don't agree with them you are a bad guy opposed to virtue. This actually happened in a concrete way in many Federations when the

proposal for the Institute for Jewish Life was being considered. A bandwagon effect was created, and many of us who opposed the new program were labelled as assimilationists and technicians, not concerned with the problem, etc. Nobody really listened to what we were saying. It had nothing to do with commitment, philosophy, objectives, etc. Our achievements spoke for themselves. We knew that the job couldn't be done from a national office; that it had to be done through programs in direct contact with Jewish bodies. We knew that good intentions were not enough, and that our agencies were not geared toward a primary Jewish identity function and program. We, who couldn't get a nickel for new approaches to Jewish identity (outside of Jewish education) were unable to resist the bandwagon effect. We saw more than \$2,000,000 go down the drain, and we continue to see the lingering effects of that failure.

The same thing has been happening in Jewish Family Service. There has been a significant development of "Jewish" activity, all of it geared to show that the agencies are really concerned about the problem. The efforts are completely sincere, particularly in relation to staff training. But let me call your attention to an aspect of all this activity—it rarely, if ever, presents data as to its effects on clients. In this connection, I'd like to quote a statement made by Dr. Philip Jaslow, of the Temple University School of Social Work, in a recent study he made of the effects of program on certain client groups:

It might be noted, here, that impact evaluations of social service programs often rely upon the observations of professionals, and upon quantitative measures of effectiveness. To assess outcomes with broad-aim and multifaceted programs, however, in which goals are neither specific nor easily operationalized, such approaches are not terribly productive in that they tend to constrain judgments of effectiveness to arbitrary criteria imposed by the

evaluator, without regard to what the client was looking for or how he or she perceived the result. Program participants are often evaluated on the basis of criteria which have little relevance for them, and impact judged on scales that may exceed or underestimate their individual capacities and/or expectations. Furthermore, such approaches require baseline (pre-intervention) data to be worthwhile, necessitating a resource commitment which is precluded by the budget of most small programs."

Do you recall the discussion at our table at the Conference, where a leading executive of a large family and children's agency proudly and very sincerely referred to her staff training program? That agency has for years had an excellent staff training program of Jewish elements. What I am waiting for, and what people like you should be asking for, is some evidence that all of that activity has had some positive Jewish effect upon a significant number of Jewish clients. Such evidence has never been presented. That is the kind of evidence we must have if we are going to turn things around to the point where Jewish identity efforts become a priority, and that's the reason for my concept of a new function and experimental programs to develop the data.

All of the foregoing constitutes the background which led to the paper I read at the Conference. Time didn't permit an elaboration of all the relevant factors. What I faced was a national situation rooted in hard experience; the challenge of how, in the face of all of these discouraging factors, can we hope to capture the attention of a preoccupied leadership? How can we get them to think that entirely new emphases are needed in Jewish communal services, with possibly radically different approaches to financing? (A focus on meaningful Jewish identity programming in Jewish centers, for example, would mean a very different approach to Center financing). My answer to these

questions was to develop a new idea, a new concept in informal education, which would be in the nature of demonstration and experiment to begin with, and hopefully would produce hard data to show that an effective job can be done.

That's only one idea. There may be a dozen others, perhaps better and more doable. What troubles me is the absence of any ideas which would break into the unending circle of good intentions, myths, inadequate programming, phony claims, unprovable assumptions, bandwagon jumping, declarations of virtue and very little significant change and accomplishment.

Bernie, I am delighted that we have had this opportunity for an exchange of views. It's the thing I miss most, and I welcome more of it.

Ridley Park, Pennsylvania
July 12, 1983

*From Dr. Reisman to
Charles Miller*

Your response to my response is very helpful in clarifying your views, and I am appreciative for it. Indeed, I intend to use the correspondence in my classes with the graduate students in Jewish Communal Service.

You correctly identify as an objective of Jerry Bubis and me to focus attention on the Jewish objectives of the communal agencies. But I think you don't give us sufficient credit for respecting the integrity and competence of our professional colleagues. It is one thing to challenge professionals to upgrade their knowledge and sensitivities to the Jewish component of their work and another to seek to impose an alien set of values upon them. I would hope that

what we have been doing is the former and not the latter. One important function you have been fulfilling is to keep us honest in this process: to avoid being self-righteous and to remember and appreciate the important skills and achievements of the Jewish communal professionals.

I also found helpful your thoughtful analysis of the contemporary forces which impose significant burdens on the Jewish communal agencies. I think you tend to underestimate the resurgence of Jewish interest on the part of 4th generation American Jews. So, while there certainly is indifference and apathy on the Jewish dimension there also are bright spots. This then becomes a question of whether the glass is half-filled or half-empty. I tend to take a more optimistic view than you do. My concern becomes that the leadership of the Jewish community—lay and professional—not fall behind their constituency because they fail to perceive the emerging Jewish interests.

Another important reminder you offer me is the need to take into account the ever present resistances to change and to appreciate that lasting change requires much more than good intentions.

Finally, you offer an appropriate and responsible path to advancing the dialogue with your challenge that we undertake research to measure the impact of agency Jewish programs on their clients. I take this challenge very seriously and see this as the only appropriate next step in the realm of exploring the Jewish purposes and programs of our Jewish communal agencies.

Thanks for writing.

I hope you are having a pleasant summer.

Brandeis University
July 20, 1983