Community Organization in Jewish Communal Work

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What we (in Federations) do requires a set of professional skills and it requires Jewish knowledge and a profound value commitment to the Jewish community. Any trade-off of one for the other in the hiring of personnel is expedient . . . What we dare not do . . . is make a virtue out of our expediency . . .

I have always remembered, if not been guided by, the warning that a Federation colleague once gave to me—"be careful that you don't start believing the lies you tell other people." Do we believe that those of us providing leadership to the Jewish community in the tasks of community development and social planning are skilled professionals because we carry the title and the salary that accompanies a job slot? I assume it is obvious that those of us who provide occasional medical advice to our friends are not physicians, and conversely, physicians engaged in non-medical areas of practice are not professionals in those areas.

Those of us who perform paid community work may describe ourselves as professionals, but the professionalism often resides in the prior training of the one of us filling the position, rather than that there is a match between the training and the professional requirements of the position currently being filled. And to compound the problem, those who hire us are frequently not convinced that community work requires any identified set of disciplined knowledge and skills.

And so, in the face of this confusion, we seem prepared to tell ourselves and those who pay our salaries that we are supplying professional leadership to our communities. Indeed, we are supplying leadership of a sort to our communities—sometimes very good, and sometimes not so very good. But is it leadership that operates out of a common knowledge base? Is it leadership possessing an identified body of skills and meeting certain training requirements? Is it leadership that is involved in adding to its own professional knowledge base?

These questions are not new, but the continued diversity of the answers, as evidenced by the state of practice in the field, suggests some possible explanations for the confusion:

1. The questions are rhetorical—that is, nobody really believes that community development and social planning in Jewish community work require professional training in the sense that the concept of "professional" is understood in most other fields of endeavor.

2. "Community organization" as a professional discipline is so poorly defined and conceived that it is unimportant that our practice positions be filled with people who possess some academic qualifications for "community organization." Or the benign interpretation of this point might be that social work is really the powerful professional training and sub-specialties are the unnecessary frosting on the cake. That point might provide an intellectual cover for all those trained in group work who have moved to community organization work. However, this rationale hardly works for many of our non-social work colleagues who raise our funds and join with us in the Association of Jewish Community Organization Personnel.

3. Or it may be that we are slowly and painfully defining a field of practice and trying to give it some spurious prestige by claiming that we who labor in it are professionals. I am afraid that the two most common factors which unite all of us in AJCOP are that we are paid and that we are Jewish. It may even be that most of us are trained in social work, although I doubt it. I will not pursue that obvious chaos in our field of practice. The chaos is reasonably well-known to most of us, although we probably differ as to what, if anything, needs to be done about it.

There is another possible explanation for all of this which I am attracted to, and I shall use this explanation to underpin a set of ideas about where we are and where we might be headed. Let me state these ideas in no particular order of importance:

1. The fact that the largest common denominator among us is that we are Jewish and paid is not incidental. Unlike casework and group work in communal service (although much less so in the latter), I think there are hardly any of us who work in agencies who, given the choice of having only two workers in that agency's universe, would choose to hire the non-Jew trained in community organization rather than the Jew without training. Is there any other area of work presuming to require professional training where identification with a client is considered more important than assumed skills in helping that client? There is one parallel which derives from the mid- and late-1960s—that period when a growing subprofessionalism had its roots in the primacy which social scientists and government funders gave to identification with clients of visible minority status as a criterion for hiring.[1]

[1] Melvin Mogulof, "*New Careers in the Model Cities Program,*" Planning 1968, American Society of Planning Officials, Chicago, Illinois, 1968.

The people who hire us are not idiots; they know that if they have to judge competence and adequacy of preparation, they will first bet their money on identification prior to gambling on assumed competence. (Incidentally, could it be argued that we need some empiricism—that is, that we might be better off with fewer Jews and more professional community organizers, if that were the trade-off Jewish communal service had to make?)

2. I am not privy to the politics or the planning of the Council of Jewish Federations, but I can make some assumptions based on the data I see around me. When the chips were down, in my view, CJF became a house organ for Federations rather than a proponent for professionalism. Of course, those who have led CJF would say they tried to do both, and so they have. But the facts are fairly loud, particularly in the area of fund-raising personnel. The dominant theme has been to fill the job, rather than to fill the job only with trained personnel or with personnel who would, at least, commit themselves to securing training.

3. The field we work in is continuing to increase its emphasis on knowledge of setting rather than on (or in the best of worlds, in addition to) the skills we bring to that setting. It brings to mind the bitter comment that Alex Rosen, then of Jewish Welfare Board, made about some social workers in Jewish communal service. He called them "captive workers"; captured by the standards and working conditions of the field, but not captured by its sectarian values. The tables have now turned. It is not too hard to predict that increasingly, many of our professionals will be more sophisticated about our Jewish communal setting than they will be about the intervention skills to be used in the pursuit of competent development and social planning in that setting.

Before moving on in this argument, I must clarify my bias with regard to the strain I am depicting between the pulls of professional skills and the requirements of our practice settings. I believe that professional skills without an abiding value commitment to the development and continuity of the Jewish community are not worth much to us as Jews. But I believe that until there is evidence that community organization fits us badly, or that any professional training in an allied area fits us equally well, that we must fight for the staff requisites of Jewish knowledge and value commitments *and* professional community organization skills. Simply working in the field on a paid basis does not make one a professional. And professional training in a field distant from, or even close to, community organization in social work does not make one a professional. For example, teachers practicing as community organizers are not professionals. Professional practice requires a level of training and skills plus an appropriate setting in which to practice the skills which have been presumably learned.

The remainder of this paper will examine some of the practice problems surrounding community organization in Jewish communal service and further speculate as to whether the professionally trained community organization worker is potentially competent to work with these problems. If there is a poor match, it may be because I have incorrectly defined the practice problems. Or it may be that the specialness of Jewish community work has so overwhelmed the generic headings of community organization that knowledge of setting and commitment to the importance of its problems are, indeed, more important than the intervention and organization skills of the trained community organizer.

Practice Problems within Types of Community Organization Practice

I know that many of us still recall and even reread Jack Rothman's seminal paper of 14 years ago on "Three Models of Community Organization."[2] The Rothman paper was written at a time when many of us were involved in developing the capacity for adversarial action in visible minority communities; and Rothman and others who theorized about community organization were building on an existing literature which dealt with centrally directed community development efforts (much of it in third-world developing countries). These two streams—social activism with America's deprived populations and community development in developing countries—were joined by Rothman to a more technologically oriented social planning to create three practice models. The result was to put a common professional blanket labelled "social planning" over those engaged in social policy-making functions and those whose work resembled the classic community organization concept of interorganizational work, and join these social planners to those engaged in community development and social action.

Kramer and Specht, in the introduction to their forthcoming third edition of their book, *Community Organization Practice,* soften the third leg of the community organization stool (social action as community organization) and focus on community development and social planning.[3] I think it is a focus which has a peculiarly good fit to the realities of community organization practice in Jewish communal service. The American Jewish community does

[2] Jack Rothman, "New Models of Community Organization Practice," *Social Work Practice,* 1968.

[3] Ralph Kramer and Harry Specht, "Introduction to Third Edition, *Community Organization Practice,*" Unpublished, 1982, p. 31.

not suffer from an imbalance of resource distribution which suggests the need for an adversarially oriented practice. The essential issues confronting the Jewish community which engage our skills are the development of *participation in* and *identification with* the Jewish community; the development of organizational structures appropriate to participation and identification; the articulation of values, goals, and objectives suitable to an American Jewry; the raising of resources directed to the achievement of objectives; the task of professionally advising the distribution of these resources; and the never-ending assignment of assessing whether this entire process is good for the Jews.

I propose to examine each of these tasks in terms of what they call for in practice and how well-served we are by what is happening.

If Kramer and Specht are prepared to see community development and social planning as the two primary themes of community organization practice, then I want to state at the outset that the potentials of fund-raising in the Jewish community are squarely within the domain of community organization practice. In fact, I would like to go even further and suggest that fund-raising is the essential and central community organization task in Jewish community work. It is the task for which professional training as a community organization worker is *most* necessary. I view the annual campaign as a metaphor for community development. In the annual campaign, we are attempting to create the grounds for identification, participation, development of social bonds, articulation of Jewish values, and making Jewish leadership visible. None of these concepts is new to any of us, and some of us practice as if these objectives have salience for our Jewish community's development. But generally speaking, we judge and are judged in our tasks as community developers in the single dimension of "how did we do compared to last year?" There is no avoiding that question, and we can never deal seriously with the other potentials of fund-raising activity until we can successfully answer that question. But without a professional framework which views fund-raising as the core Jewish community development task, we will be confined to a single and ultimately deadly conception of practice—that is, more money as *the* criterion of success. With the loss or reduction of some of those factors which have underwritten the magnificence of Jewish fund-raising, the "well may be running dry" (to borrow a concept we are all familiar with) and only fund-raising conceived as a professional community development practice may help us to surmount effectively all of the negative variables confronting us in organized Jewish communal life,[4] (i.e., limited general participation in the community, a narrow base of leadership, the marginality of Jewish communal values to many of those we work with, and so forth.

If fund-raising is, indeed, a metaphor for community development, how does the fund-raiser-community developer deal with some of the major variables he encounters in practice?

The raising of funds is the favorite activity of very few people. Its appeal and importance lie in the instrumentality of the funds raised and in the process of raising funds. If we believed our own conception that "giving" is an opportunity for identification, then the process of organization for that opportunity is, indeed, important. The social (and financial) bonds created by a good campaign—the pooling of resources for

[4] Paul Ritterband and Steven M. Cohen, "Will the Well Run Dry? The Future of Jewish Giving," *Congress Monthly*, June 1979, pp. 11–15.

our common good and common purpose—are the essence of community development activity. To fund-raise as a community development effort; to enable participation and identification; to articulate the values and goals which bind us in a campaign effort; to develop leadership for this effort; to establish community organizational structures for this effort and to assess continuously whether this cyclical effort is effective and what its unanticipated consequences might be—these are the essence of community development as a community organization practice. Is there any doubt as to whether this practice requires a disciplined and conscious use of self? An understanding of community power and community as a social system? An intimacy with the uses and consequences of conflict? The ability to train leadership and to help that leadership to achieve? An awareness of how to build organizational structure and the potentials of different organizational structures in helping to achieve communal purpose? And, finally, the essential role of assessment in any process that purports to be one which is professionally guided?

I do not mean to suggest that knowledge of cómmunity, power, conflict, social exchange, interorganizational relationships, organizational structure, leadership development and the knowledge of evaluation are unique to community organization practice. Some of this knowledge characterizes a number of disciplines rooted in the social sciences. But when this knowledge rests in a person who is also disciplined and conscious in the use of self, we begin to sense the potential professional strength of community organization as a social work practice. And, finally, with an importance equal to knowledge of discipline and conscious use of self, when we add the need for an articulated set of values which views practice directed toward Jewish purpose as central rather than incidental, we have the joining of those factors that ought to mark as well as distinguish all of us as community workers.

Social work as a profession is powerfully committed to certain values about a "good" society, and powerfully committed to the influence of "agency" on practice. Social work provides grounds for merging our knowledge of professional practice and our devotion to particular values and goals in a field of practice—in our case, Jewish values and goals. And that, I believe, is what makes community development in Jewish communal practice so special. The Jewish values and commitments are not in lieu of professionalism (which is so often the case), nor are they antithetical to professionalism. It is the professionalism of the community developer with a clear commitment to use those skills in the service of the Jewish community that unites our professionalism and our value commitments into a whole. In the past, we have settled for the professionalism without the Jewish value commitments. Now there are some in the field who have made a virtue of Jewish knowledge and value commitments as more important than professional skills. I think there can be no community organization practice in Jewish communal service unless both are present, and I do not accept one without the other as meeting the requirements of being a professional in either Jewish community development (fund-raising), or in social planning for the Jewish community.

If the picture of fund-raising I have portrayed is more than many intended it to be, and much more than many of our colleagues adhere to, it may be some measure of the lies we have told each other. Fund-raising in Federations is not a suede-shoe operation—it is community development in its best sense, and

we ought to begin to measure our practice against the potential.

Social planning in Jewish communal service is not currently in the same circumstances as fund-raising. Those of us who administer agencies, work with policy bodies, occupy our professional lives with the ulcerating pleasures of Jewish interorganizational work, and worry about the never-ending tensions in the task of allocating Jewish communal resources, have never had much question that what we were doing required a body of professional skills. As with our colleagues in fund-raising, we, too, need to understand power, community, exchange relationships, conflict, leadership development, value articulation, organizational structure and program evaluation. Our understanding of self and the conscious use of self is no more or less important than it is to our colleagues in fund-raising. The question of Jewish commitment and knowledge is just as basic.

We are united with our fund-raiser-community development colleagues in what Kramer and Specht see as the generic community organization task of "helping people to identify problems, develop organization, plan and carry out programs, and assess their efforts."[5]

If either of our two mainstreams in Jewish community work—community development and social planning—does not recognize in the Kramer/Specht statement a basic conception of how it earns its bread, then we have the most serious of discontinuities between practice and conception. What we do requires a set of professional skills and it requires Jewish knowledge and a profound value commitment to the Jewish community. Any trade-off of one for the other in the hiring of personnel is expedient and ought to be recognized as such. What we dare not do for the sake of that which we care about as professional community workers, and as Jews, is to make a virtue out of our expediency in hiring untrained people, or to supplant professional training, and substitute *Yiddishkeit* as the *sine qua non* of the community practitioner. I think Jewish community work does not require a new discipline or some hybrid which is more Jewish than it is community organization. And Jewish community work cannot tolerate an institutionalization of our current "thousand flowers" approach to the employment of fund-raisers and others in Jewish communal work.

I am sorry if, in the process of this argument, I have made second-class practitioners of a number of workers who have begun to think about themselves as some new breed of Jewish community organizer. What we do requires both professional training as social workers with community organization skills and deep and abiding commitment as Jews. If you don't have the latter commitment, why not stop personifying Alex Rosen's "captive worker"? Go in good health—but please go. If you don't have the training, that's easy to remedy. Get it! But don't make a virtue of our current eclecticism. If you don't believe that community organization as it is currently being taught or practiced meets the requirements of Jewish communal work, then posit a different model of professional training and skills, and let us examine it for its fit. But let us not retreat to a Jewish "know nothingism" which denigrates the need for specialized training and posits Jewish identification *u ber alles.* Let us not live with a conception that, somehow, fund-raising is a lesser order of practice requiring diluted skills and preparation. We are all (fund-raisers and planners) Jewish community workers and we will all need a lot of skill accompanied by some measure of luck if the community we work for is to continue making it.

[5] Kramer and Specht, *op. cit.*, p. 33