

## The Jewishness of the Jewish Community Center: A Theory of Dissonance\*†

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*(Jewish community centers) are bombarded with pressure to "be Jewish" and "do Jewish" from all sides. It seems to me that the more we are bombarded, the less our attitude changes.*

IN one of my original drafts of this paper I had a quote (or more) from each of twenty years of meetings of the Association of Jewish Center Workers which says exactly the same thing that I am saying; namely that our Centers have to be more Jewish than they are! I was seriously thinking of another title for this paper. *Ayn Chadash Tachat Hashemesh*—taken from the book of Koheleth, (Ecclesiastes) of course, "there is nothing new under the sun."

There is no program recommendation or policy change which can be stated today which has not been stated sometime in the past twenty years. Some of our most esteemed colleagues have stood before us and recommended a variety of programs, services and ideas to enhance the Jewishness of our agencies. I cite only a couple of examples, as the emphasis I want to make today is on a theory of dissonance between all of these theories and suggestions, and our own actions.

At the 1962 Atlantic City Meeting, Jewish Welfare Board Executive, Sandy Solender, addressed the Association of Jewish Center Workers in a major keynote address entitled "The Vital Future of the Jewish Community Center in

America".<sup>1</sup> The preliminary conference program had entitled the session "To Be As One", which would have debuted the new JWB film about the Jewish community center movement. The change in title, and content, came about when the journal, *Conservative Judaism*, published in the spring of 1962, a symposium lashing against the JCC movement. Mr. Solender took the opportunity of the AJCW Plenary session to respond to the attacks which in his words were "designed to destroy the Jewish community center as an institution." The articles in the symposium attempted to make the following points: That the purposes of the Jewish community center are not intrinsically Jewish; that the Center program content is not sufficiently Jewish; that Center professional leadership is deficient in Jewish background and commitment; that Center lay-leadership is marginally Jewish; and that by their open-door policy the Center contributes to intermarriage. The obvious conclusion was that since Centers do not contribute to the enrichment, development, or preservation of Jewish life in America, the funds they receive from the Federations should be redistributed to the synagogues in order to enhance synagogue educational and youth programs. Solender's landmark paper responded well to each of these charges,

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† To my colleague and friend, Emanuel Berlatsky, on the occasion of his 75th birthday, may we have the opportunity to discuss this paper *bist a hundred un tsuanstik*.

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<sup>1</sup> Sanford Solender, "The Vital Future of the Jewish Community Center in America". mimeo., undated, 13 pp.

which in most cases were grossly exaggerated.

Five years later, in 1967 I was present at my first AJCW meeting to hear my professor, Charles Levy, of Wurzweiler School of Social Work declare "conditions in the Jewish community center field and forces operating in and on Center personnel are at best not maximally conducive to the achievement of Center purposes, and at worst, antithetical to them."

Although he did not refer to dissonance, my distinguished colleague and mentor, Graenam Berger, in a paper which he delivered the same year I entered the field, sixteen years ago, talked about the problem of the attitude of lay-leadership. Although not calling it so, he summed up dissonance theory by stating "active, generous, and thoughtful, as so many of them are, most were recruited not to serve an institution devoted primarily to advance Jewish purposes. Even for those who have a Jewish background, the fetish of diversity, the unwillingness to crystallize a discrete Jewish position, the belief that we can survive as Jews on the brink of marginality" will continually create a problem of reaching our goals, until "most of our Centers subscribe to the fundamental principal that they exist today to teach Jews to live fully as Jews in America." This quote, found in Berger's book, *The Jewish Community Center as a Fourth Force* summarizes his opinion that our primary task is to "be Jewish" and "teach Jewish." It alludes to the same problem that we are talking about today . . . None of us would disagree with such an attitude . . . The question on my agenda, however, is how many of us consciously work to bring our behavior (our actions) into consonance with this attitude?

This paper has its roots in my college days, when I studied Leon Festinger's *Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* in social psychology, and my desire to go beyond

a simple list of suggestions on how to "be more Jewish."

For those of us who are not familiar with Festinger's theory on cognitive dissonance it links and contrasts *attitude* to *overt behavior*. This is a particular useful theory since researchers often argued that the study of attitudes was useless, because no one could be sure that a person would behave in accordance with his verbally expressed attitudes. Festinger's theory sought to remedy this shortcoming by specifying the conditions under which attitudes and behavior do correspond.

The purpose of this paper is to link this theory to our practice, and present some suggestions for reducing the dissonance between our attitudes toward Jewish community center service delivery and our behavior in our daily work. Toward this end, some of Festinger's points are well taken. After reviewing some of them we can move on to applying them to our daily practice.

Festinger states, "the existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance."<sup>2</sup>

He states further, "when dissonance is present, in addition to trying to reduce it, the person will actively avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance."<sup>3</sup> This postulate gets played out in our everyday work, as well as in our professional associations. There are many blatant examples, for instance, Shabbat at General Assemblies, Biennials and Conventions. Shabbat becomes the day, for the majority of the convention participants, set aside to "see the town, get in some shopping, and generally have a day off from the convention program."

<sup>2</sup> Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. New York: Harper & Row, 1957, p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*; p. 3.

*Attitude:* I am a lay (a professional) leader because I want to assure the future of the Jewish community, and I want to work for our survival. *Situation:* On Friday evening, Biennial participants are invited to worship and have Shabbat dinner with the extended convention family. *Reality:* Less than 25% of the participants participate in the Convention Shabbat programs. *Dissonance reduction:* By avoiding these convention activities, the participant reduces the need to be uncomfortable in this quintessential Jewish atmosphere. The dissonance is thereby reduced—by actively avoiding the Shabbat program. Our point is that we work *hard* to avoid situations which would increase the dissonance!

Following through on our theory, it could be said that if a Center professional or lay-leader were *induced* to say or do something opposite to his private attitude, he will tend to modify his attitude so as to make it consonant with the cognition of what he has said or done. This is consistent with the concept of having to reduce the dissonance in any given situation. One can see the logic of this postulate from studying the dissonance theory. This would mean that if these Convention participants were somehow induced to become involved in Shabbat celebrations and observances in which they are normally not involved, their attitude toward these activities would have to be modified to bring it into consonance with their cognitive actions. None of us is inclined to participate in activities on a regular basis toward which we have a negative attitude. Therefore we would have to change our attitude to be in compliance with our behavior.

This sounds terrific, until we take note that psychologists have found that the greater the pressure used to elicit the behavior contrary to one's private attitude, the less his attitude will change.

Studies over the last 30 years have affirmed this unusual point . . . meaning that we will resist change by erecting elaborate defense mechanisms if a great deal of pressure is applied. In some of the studies I reviewed, it was found that large amounts of money paid by the testers in a controlled setting could not get people's attitudes to change for the subjects at hand.

The relevancy to our JCC theory is that we are bombarded with pressure to "be Jewish" and "do Jewish" from all sides. It seems to me that the more we are bombarded, the less our attitude changes.

We pay lip service to sessions at this very conference, at Executive Seminars, General Assemblies, Biennials and the like. Rarely do we stop to analyze the dissonance . . . we are what we are, and all of the Jewish consciousness raising is not going to change us. How many of us have been present during a particularly emotional session at one of the above named conferences, when we were so moved, that we made an immediate resolve that as soon as we got home we would begin a new course of study or investigate previously unpracticed rituals? The conference session was terrific! The promise was made solely to reduce the dissonance of the moment . . . and is completely forgotten by the time one got home.

Our theory is very sophisticated—subtle, and sometimes subconscious. Let's take a look at how dissonance is reduced. There are three ways of reducing dissonance: the first is to *change a behavioral cognitive element*. When our behavior is dissident with a belief, it is often simplest to change one's behavior. In its simplest terms, this would mean that a Jewish communal professional who is a non-practicing unknowledgeable Jew should become a practicing knowledgeable Jew. This would reduce the dissonance we have in the Jewish

Center field, since our "cognitive element" is that the quality of Jewish life and the continuity of Jewish life are essential to the purpose and goal of our institutions. The dissonance is that our own behavior, in our personal and professional lives, does not reflect this cognitive element. Since this does not all of a sudden make the 1100 members of AJCW practicing knowledgeable Jews, where does this leave our ability to reduce dissonance?

The second way to reduce dissonance is to *change an environmental cognitive element*. This means that if we can't change our belief, change the environment within which we operate to be in consonance with our belief! In terms of our JCC dissonance theory, this means that the personal life and professional behavior of many Center workers is dissonant with the environmental factor of a strong Jewish program and philosophy at the agency. In order to change this environment, the worker aligns himself with other colleagues and/or laymen who believe the same way. "Joe Ginsberg was a leading professional in our field, and he didn't have a problem either", or "look, that's what the lay people want!" Therefore, we continue to be comfortable in the environment as we now perceive it, but in reality there is still a dissonance between our personal philosophy and our professional goals.

The final way to reduce dissonance is through *the addition of new cognitive elements*. In our JCC theory, this means that we add an interesting cognitive element: The very fact that we have dedicated our working lives to making a better Jewish community makes it "OK" that our own personal practice does not reflect a more Jewishly conscious pattern. This is the professional, who has satisfactorily reduced his dissonance, and who has sometimes been referred to as the "professional Jew" instead of the "Jewish professional".

If one were to find fault with all of these references to the reduction of dissonance in our daily situations, it would be that the act of reducing the dissonance, in effect, causes a major defense mechanism. We are able to proceed on a daily basis in an atmosphere which appears to be less dissonant, but in reality ultimately inhibits us from bringing our behavior in consonance with our attitude.

These same arguments can be used when taking a look at the behavior of our leadership. Dissonance becomes apparent at many Center Board meetings. An outside observer could note that JCC Board of Directors is often convened in order to run an agency, which delivers a product which they themselves do not want to purchase! A board will deliberate for a length of time regarding certain Jewish programs and/or services; for instance, to change policy and open the agency on Sukkot and Shavout. After much deliberation, they vote the request down, and then feel their "Jewish" obligation has been fulfilled by exercising their trusteeship for the agency. The problem here is that the holidays in question usually have little personal meaning to them. This can be considered the ultimate in dissonance since their attitude during the deliberations was intense, but their overt behavior does not make sense in relationship to the attitude they were expressing. Therefore, the best way to bring the two elements into consonance is to use the trusteeship of having "preserved the holiday" as reason for not having to personally become involved in the holiday.

We as professionals share equally in this burden. In an informal survey of some 30 of my colleagues this spring, I attempted to determine the level of dissonance in current Center practice. I asked each of them to give me their opinion on certain practice items with regard to the Jewish component of our

work, and then I asked them to rate their current practice on this same issue. The results are far from scientific, although I must say my social research days at Wurzweiler have stimulated me to turn these informal results into some formal study! They do reveal support for my theory.

My colleagues were able to use a scale of 1 to 5 effectively in demonstrating the existence of dissonance in our every day work. While I will not go into the results of all ten areas I thought it would be helpful to cite the following examples:

One of the most consistent, and simplest recommendations we have been making at this meeting each year, has been to recommend that each of us go home and make sure the lobbys of our JCC buildings have a distinctive and positive Jewish presence. This includes displays on Israel, seasonal holiday displays, Jewish calendars, appropriate art work, and appropriate displays. You can't get more basic. One of the ten questions I asked both for opinion and practice was "the lobby of the JCC has distinctive Jewish presence." Every respondent rated this item as being number 1 or 2, meaning that in their opinion this was an important task. Only 20 percent of those same respondents rated their current practice on this item a 1 or 2, which would have indicated consistent practice in assuring that the JCC lobby has a distinctive Jewish presence. Eighty percent of them rated this item at a much lower practice level while indicating that their attitude was most positive. In essence, by use of this scale, the participants were identifying their dissonant areas for themselves. They had an attitude that the lobby should be of a certain nature, but their practice was not consistent with making the lobby reflect their opinion.

Similar results were obtained in other questions asked. For instance, another item was "each Center staff meeting has

a Jewish training component". The majority of respondents agreed with this statement, and yet rated it in a category of doing it only once in a great while. We said earlier that there is really nothing new under the sun. None of these results is surprising either. What I would like to contribute to our discussion is the concept of becoming consciously aware of the dissonance in our environment, and implications for the dissonance reduction.

Applying all of the theory and examples that we have discussed, I would like to conclude with the following recommendations and observations.

Center professionals come from a wide background in Jewish life, and some of our most competent professionals are not necessarily the most identified with Jewish life. Our theory says that this in itself causes dissonance to exist. Since we cannot convert people to be what they are not, in order to reduce the dissonance, let us look at the following suggestions:

1. As administrators of agencies, where our own attitudes are dissonant with the goals and philosophies of our agencies, we can make a conscious decision to fill every vacant slot with an employee whose dissonance is not as great as our own. The implication here is that dissonance reduction would be accomplished on the program delivery level by these staff people.

2. With regard to changing the environment as a way of reducing dissonance, certain key calendar changes can be effected. In the long run if our theory is ultimately correct, attitude and behavior will change as a result. These calendar changes can include: a) Spending just five or ten minutes at each staff meeting involved in a Jewish training component. In some Centers this takes the form of a *D'var Torah*, in which a rotating staff begins the meeting discussing some Jewish subject. b)

The same can go for a board meeting. At many board meetings, judging from the agenda, it is often difficult to know that we are discussing the fate of a Jewish community center. A board meeting can spend five or ten minutes discussing a common subject of Jewish interest led by a rotating member of the board.

3. The environment would change for the better if all of our printed material would reflect some type of Jewish presence. Weekly newsletters, semester catalogs, stationary, can all help change the environment to be consonant with our goal of a strong Jewish connection.

4. Our Health & Physical Education Centers, especially our health clubs, are often the cause of a great deal of dissonance. Some of this can be overcome, again, by a significant change in the physical environment. Health clubs should be Jewish information centers. A wall in the health club can be a major communication link with a significant number of people. The health and physical education lobby can be a glorified Jewish calendar. These ideas sound either trite or tried, but they are not and they are at the essence of our work. I find that they are often considered to be so "simple" that they are overlooked.

5. In many of our communities there is a splintered effort at running adult Jewish education courses by various organizations. We are beginning to see the emergence of communities coming together to establish one night as dedicated to continuing Jewish education, with a common agreement and consent that no board or committee meetings will be held on that given night. This is a major environmental change, one in which we agree that the emphasis is on adult Jewish education.

6. Have our staff and laymen constantly involved in Jewish learning experiences; one who is in the process of learning can reduce the dissonance by the very act of engaging in increasing the body of Jewish knowledge.

Each of these ideas certainly has sub-ideas. My purpose here was not to come out with a long list of recommendations, but rather to raise the idea that we must be conscious that our attitudes are often not in consonance with our behavior, and perhaps as a result of this discussion we can work toward bringing such consonance into being.

#### **Final Comment:**

My thanks to Dr. Solomon Green for his excellent analysis of this paper, as well as to my friend Mary Fellman for her help in hammering out some thoughts.