

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF JEWISH COMMUNITY SERVICES FOR THE PRESERVATION OF JEWISH VALUES: A FIXED POINT OF REFERENCE *

by JACOB J. WEINSTEIN

*Rabbi, K.A.M. Temple
Chicago, Illinois*

THINK it fair to say that the majority of workers in the Jewish communal field recognize their obligation toward the preservation of Jewish values. The question is, of course, what values; and, having agreed on values, what techniques to preserve them?

I am a member of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. My Congregation belongs to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Reform wing of Judaism. I am free, therefore, to determine these values for myself; having due regard, of course, to the tradition from which liberal Judaism grew and the nature of the people which this tradition is to serve.

I place first in my system of values the faith, the religion of Judaism. It is this faith which has sustained the Jewish people, enabled them to bear their troubles, saved them from assimilation to the surrounding more powerful cultures and given them a *raison d'être* for continuing as a people. The attempts to extract the culture or the peoplehood from the religion have succeeded only in producing a desiccated literature and a brittle nationalism. The Russian Communist experiment, in bowdlerizing religious

terms from the writings of Sholom Aleichem, Mendele Macher Sepporim and Yehudah Leib Peretz, revealed the utter artificiality and distortion of this effort. Thoughtful Israeli—including the Prime Minister Ben Gurion—now recognize that Israel will fulfill its destiny only as it undertakes in modern terms the prophetic role of Messianic salvation for mankind.

It is not necessary for social workers to wait on harmonious agreement between the various denominations in Judaism. Social workers should identify themselves with that phase of Judaism which is most congenial to them and work through the democratic processes of the Synagogue to bring its practice nearer to their hearts' desire. Personal identification through membership is important, not only for whatever spiritual satisfaction the worker may obtain through this identification but as a gesture of recognition of the source and original sponsor of the very agency he serves. Practically all forms of social welfare service were originally centered in the Synagogue, the overall service agency of the Kehillah. True piety, Santayana reminded us, is a sense of reverence for the sources of our being.

There are, of course, many professional ways in which social workers in Jewish agencies can support the values of Juda-

* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Chicago, Illinois, May 17, 1958.

ism. They can observe the religious calendar in the day to day running of their offices; and they should lean backwards in respecting the scruples of the Orthodox, for the more liberal among us can be much more flexible in what we consider a matter of folkways than the Orthodox can be in what they consider a matter of principle. This may appear like beating a dead horse, since this has been generally accepted as a rule of procedure. I know, however, that in this very city it is still difficult for an observant Jew to get kosher meals in one of our hospitals and the issue sometimes arises where the observant parents must use overt influence to keep their son the full eight days so that circumcision can be performed on the 8th day. I have attended Federation and C.J.A. sponsored affairs where invocations and benedictions were cavalierly omitted and when included, often given "a bum's rush"—something to get over with and get down to the solid business of the meeting.

While religion is the most important contribution of Jewish civilization, it is not an entity in itself. It comes embedded in a culture. As the culture becomes rootless and dessicated without the religion, the religion becomes stark and dogmatic without the culture. It is agreed that the educational apparatus of the Synagogue is no longer adequate to properly teach that culture even to the affiliated, let alone the unaffiliated. This is the function of Jewish Education and the agencies it has developed in the past half century. Surely it would be unfair to load the Jewish communal services with the responsibility that still belongs to parents to give their children a love, through the power of example, for Jewish learning; and it would be unfair to free the Synagogues from responsibility for the inadequacies of their organized instruction; and so, too, is it necessary to place upon professional Jewish education some share of responsibility

for the lack of imagination and creativeness which has characterized so much of Jewish education?

But Jewish education is still a step-child in the Jewish community. Too few Jewish communal workers have exerted their influence on those who have the keeping and the allocating of the communal funds to see that Jewish education gets a first priority. We think nothing of asking large sums for pilot plants for emotionally disturbed children, for elaborate psychosomatic research, for the chronically ill and the aged. We have yet to ask for anything like similar sums for enlisting and training Jewish teachers, for the development of proper curricular material, for the establishment of camp institutes, youth institutes and regional adult education facilities somewhat along the line of Great Books seminars and the Catholic retreats. We give priority to all those agencies that preserve the bodies of our people—agencies that are often duplicated in the non-Jewish community. We support research for every disease from which Jews have died. We have adopted and given *semicha*—ordination—to cancer, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, rheumatic fever, asthma, nephrosis, leukemia, etc., etc.

I remember a dear old lady who greeted the late Rabbi Solomon Goldman, just after he had made a fervid appeal for Hebrew education, for support of Histadrut Ivrit, "Dr. Goldman, you were very eloquent and I enjoyed hearing you, but the first place in my heart I still give to consumption." No one can, in his right mind, deprecate the value of this kind of research. But one can ask where does the first loyalty of the Jewish community lie? If we do not collect money for research in these various ailments, that research will still be carried on. But if we do not support the agencies of Jewish education, those agencies will cease to be. We may add a little bit to the survival potential of afflicted

people by the support of research agencies, but we will surely strengthen the survival potential of the Jewish people by creating adequate educational opportunities in our communities.

It has not been my privilege to serve on an allocation committee, so I do not speak from first-hand knowledge. I have, however, appeared before them quite often and I have spoken informally to men who have been on such committees. I have rarely found in them a value system of priorities. They operated largely on the basis of past performances and on the pressures of local groups and big givers. I have rarely heard them ask themselves, "What is my obligation as a self-accepting Jew, interested in the survival of Jewish values and the Jewish community, to this array of demands on the resources of my community?"

A viable culture and a viable religion must have a local habitation and a name. The living nexus of this religious culture of Judaism is the Jewish people. I believe, therefore, that the communal services have an obligation to the peoplehood of Israel. Anyone who works in the Jewish community knows that for every Jew who is consciously a disciple of the religion of Judaism and for every Jew who is at home in the culture of Israel, there are at least four who are Jews because they are Jews, because they have not separated themselves from the community, because they recognize their obligation to their fellow Jews. This is the blunt, stubborn fact that rebuts the comparative religionists and anthropologists and sociologists, who talk about the inevitable sublimation of minority groups in the cross fertilization of peoples in the acculturation process.

This stubborn fact rebuts the mammoth historians like Chamberlain, Spengler and Toynbee, who, each in his various way, has described the Jew to be a catalyst in alien media, destined to dissolve himself in the process of evoking re-

sponses from the host culture. When we have failed to disappear according to their fiat, they have attributed that failure to freak petrifications in the acculturation process or to some malign, cosmic need to have a perpetual witness of human perfidy on the earth. We know better. We know that behind the peculiar interplay of historic processes have been the deep devotion to family purity, the mutual aid factors of our community experience, and our sense of mission as God's peculiar priest people.

This sense of peoplehood has, thanks to the pressures of a hostile majority, been almost an unconscious—surely an automatic—response to challenge, a survival mechanism. It has largely been in the few periods of enlightenment and cultural cooperation that we have had to be consciously concerned with the preservation of our identity as a people. The establishment of the State of Israel is a remarkable confluence of two major streams in our venerable history: the hunger for survival against forces of destruction and the affirmative will to create an environment most congenial to the unique needs of our being. Jewish communal service has certainly recognized the *nachtsyl* aspect of the State of Israel and has therefore contributed to the security of that segment of our people who have found refuge there. But we have a further obligation: that one described by Achad Haam as the two-way passage of cultural interplay between Eretz and Diaspora.

Communal service leaders here must be willing to share their techniques and know-how with the young, new State. There must be increased willingness on the part of our agencies to lend-lease personnel to the orphanages, the old people's homes, the youth centers, the family service agencies in Israel. I think in this respect the record of your various bodies is rather good. Perhaps the stage will soon be reached when we can benefit

from applying some of the insights and practices, let us say, of Hadassah's youth work and Kupat Cholim's medical welfare program here. You have long been struggling with the difficult technique of not letting charity pauperize your clients. You know how important it is to preserve the dignity of the personality of those who need our communal assistance. Our own tradition made it incumbent upon one receiving charity to give a tithe to those who might be in greater need. Even though the tremendous burden of absorbing a million Jews in ten short years in the face of war and boycott has placed Israel on the receiving end of this two-way passage, there are some areas of social work wherein Israel is able to give and you would be doing a great *mitzvah* in graciously receiving.

Once we could overcome the unfortunate stance which American largesse has given us—the fixed image of the great contented cow that must be suckled by never sucks—we might learn very much from such a two-way exchange. The concept of Zedakah in Israel is better described as social justice than as charity. In that sense Israel is closer to the original Biblical concept of that word. In the Western world, where the Jew grew to comfort, if not affluence, in the free enterprise, capitalist economy, Zedakah became more and more reduced to charity.

The growth of the social welfare state in modern democracies brings us constantly face to face with the problem of deciding the areas of relationship between the proper obligation of the private charities and the proper responsibility of the state. The dangers of bureaucracy—horribly exemplified by the totalitarian governments—have made us wary of entrusting too much responsibility for individual and family welfare to the bureaucracies of municipal, state and federal government. And still we know that even if our Jews were twice as

generous in their giving for local needs, we would still be unable to provide that floor of security which we believe is the human right of every citizen. We have thought that by developing high standards of social welfare among our own we would be creating standards to which the larger community would come by a kind of osmosis, or capillary attraction.

The fact is that it does not work that way. It becomes necessary to agitate, to take political action, to arouse the community to establish the proper standards of public welfare. The Israeli social worker, whose concept of Zedakah is social justice and who works in a commonwealth that makes no hard and fast distinctions between governmental and private assistance, feels that it is part of his obligation as a social worker to see that the municipal council, or the Kennebec be made aware of the government's responsibility to the individual. Now there are differences in tradition and structure between the social welfare agencies of Israel and America, but there is a common need to develop more perfect liaison between government and voluntary agencies, so that the whole needs of the community are met. Here I believe Israel has something to teach us.

Recently I was called upon by a Polish couple—hard core refugees—who after five years of care by the Jewish Family Service bureau were turned over to the county agencies. The difference in standards of care was sharp enough to create a trauma for this couple, already shocked by the worst adversities that man's inhumanity could inflict upon a fellow man. The Jewish social worker admitted that it was a very great hardship for this couple to adjust to the inadequate relief of Cook County. There was no inclination on her part, or as far as I could determine, on the part of the agency she represented, to take any direct responsibility for raising the community standards.

Here, I believe, we have a responsibility not merely as citizens, but as Jewish citizens. This is the prophetic role of Israel—to be a troubler to the conscience until men have the dignity and security by right which now they have in measure by the sufferance of charity. The prophet, you say, has thrown his mantle on the shoulder of the Rabbi and it is for him to agitate and stir his people to work for social reform. But I must perforce share a good portion of that mantle with you, the social workers, since so many of our laymen claim that charity is their religion.

Both Rabbis and social workers have been too long selling indulgences instead of doing our proper work. For a good contribution to the Synagogue, we have often permitted our congregants to satisfy their conscience and be at ease in Zion. For a 10% increase in their last year's contribution, the social workers have too often relieved the givers of any further obligation to the community. We have been selling both religion and philanthropy (in the true sense of Zedakah) short. In our concern to protect our institutions, the vested rights of our respective properties, we have compromised our essential purpose. It was the genius of the prophet that he was willing to take the oceanic leap, that losing by which he found himself. And in that

sublimation he established new rootage for his ideals.

Historians now readily see that when the Temple and its heirarchial sacrificial system was broken up and its ideals found hospitality in the informal Synagogue, Judaism found a road to survival. It may be that the sublimation of much of our private agency work into the larger social welfare agencies of the community will not only raise the level of the community, but will establish a much more congenial soil for the preservation of Jewish values.

The gentle cynic Koheleth reminded us that there is a time to gather stones together and a time to scatter, a time to bind and a time to loose. Just as it becomes necessary at this historic moment to secure the particularity of Israel through the establishment of the State of Israel, so at the very same time does it become necessary to assure the universality of Judaism by sending its leavening spirit into the body politic. If this appears inconsistent, life is inconsistent. To see life steadily and to see it whole requires that one and the same person, at one and the same time, must fulfill what appear on the surface as contradictory or ambivalent roles. Let us find comfort in the *Saying of the Fathers*: that these and those also are the words of the living God.