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**79th ANNUAL MEETING NATIONAL
CONFERENCE JEWISH COMMUNAL SERVICE**
June 5—8, 1977
Shorham Americana Hotel Washington, D.C.

An Exchange of Letters on Agency-Federation Relationships Between Herbert Millman and Charles Miller

Dear Charlie:

I have finally caught up with your splendid article on "Changing Dimensions in Federation-Agency Relationships" (Fall, 1976 this Journal).

A few comments and suggestions come to mind:

In the past, you have several times given me the privilege of reviewing drafts of your articles and speeches before they were put into final form. I have noted a pattern of approach that tends to bury great ideas and concepts deep in the text and thus dilutes their impact on the reader and, sometimes, on yourself.

In this fine article, it takes you four pages to get to what could have been your opening thrust and, thereby, provide a platform for vision, broadened understanding and even inspiration in clarifying Federation-generation relationships. I refer to the middle two sentences in item 3 and the middle sentence in item 4, both on page 18.

If these two were connected to form the introduction to the article, I cannot resist wondering where this would have taken you.

Later, I will indicate where I think it might have led you, but first, let me put them together for your review. You say:

Federation and its constituent agencies will be more clearly seen as an ethnic communal system, as a family constellation of entities and interests bound together by core elements of history, religion, sense of peoplehood, and common objectives. The objectives of the total ethnic system will play a much more significant role in determining the nature and scope of agency services.

As the sense of the ethnic partnership intensifies, Federation leadership will more and more regard agency leadership as partners in a joint communal enterprise, sharing the responsibility for all major community problems and needs, including the fundamental job of raising funds.

I submit that this is a noble thesis which could lead to an affirmative statement of implications for and guidelines to making the "ethnic communal system" work.

Some of the implications it seems to me, are that:

1. We would move from a focus on a we-they relationship between Federations and agencies (and who is "primary"), to a focus on the concept of a Jewish community and the process required to make it function successfully.
2. Instead of predicting "who would call the shots," the concept you state so well would evoke a desire to clarify respective, mutual and common tasks.
3. This clarification would and should lend to the effort to apply the Deweyian concept that "authority is vested in function" to clarifying agency relationships, respective responsibilities in social planning, etc. I am sure that you can identify others.

Such identification of implications could then lead to guidelines on what Federations and agencies can do to make the great idea of an ethnic communal system come alive. These could deal with a) quality of leadership, b) educating leaders in the concept of the community as a functional organism, c) social planning functions, d) community fund raising, e) staff selection and development, f) community relations, g) supporting Israel and the sense of Jewish peoplehood, etc., etc.

I think that the field is ready for affirmative treatment of what is involved in making our voluntary system function at its best, without parochial preoccupation with "power" and "authority."

If you are right that we are maturing as an "ethnic communal system"—and I absolutely agree that this is what we should strive to

achieve—then it would be an act of social statesmanship to help professionals to nurture this idea and to understand better how they can contribute to it.

Herbert Millman

Dear Herb:

As always it was good to hear from you and particularly to have your thoughtful comments on my paper. I look forward to our getting together to discuss your points in depth, because in a letter it is difficult to come to grips with subtle and complex issues. However, I would like to give you some quick reactions to your comments, more to raise questions rather than to argue the points.

It seems to me that one of the basic problems involved in this kind of a discussion relates to how we conceptualize the Federation-agency relationship. Crucial to such a conceptualization are the premises we begin with and these are not always explicit. My own premises assume two fundamental aspects of that relationship:

1. I see Federation as the sum total of all central communal objectives, programs and functions, and therefore much more important than any of the elements that make up that totality. That totality consists of objectives, programs and functions concerned with international, national and local needs and issues. I therefore make the related assumption that any one of the many functions cannot be considered to be equal in significance to the totality.
2. The Federation has central fiscal responsibility, and is therefore in its very nature, a structure with power and authority in relation to its beneficiaries. This is not a question of philosophy, of what should or should not be, of good or bad, or right or wrong. It is an inescapable reality which has to be understood and accepted as such.

From the viewpoint of these basic assump-

tions, the "we-they relationship" which you seem to reject, or at least to which you appear to deny validity, is inherent. That denial sees "we-they" as a bad thing, to be resisted and challenged at every step. This is the attitude which characterized a whole generation of Center leaders, starting with Lou Kraft, and currently expressed so well by Abe Vinik. To my way of thinking, that is most unfortunate, and is a major reason why Centers have so much difficulty with Federations.

As in any professional problem and challenge, correct approaches to "treatment" depend upon correct diagnosis of the problem. Agencies, and particularly Centers, will never exist in a relatively stable and peaceful relationship with Federations unless they accept the basic realities of the nature of Federation. That is a key point of my paper.

You suggest application of the Deweyian concept that "authority is vested in function." If this is true, why do you have so much trouble in applying that to Federation function? Aside from that point, let's carry the functional issue a bit further.

Historically, Centers were a major focus of Jewish communal life in many communities in this country. Often they were more important than the Federations in a number of ways. Their leaders more often than not were the community leaders. But the whole point of my paper is that changes have shifted the focus of community power and authority (let's not flinch from the words, because they express reality). A new central consciousness is developing which requires clarification of and adherence to central communal objectives. Agency functions were developed by staffs and boards before the ethnic system (Federation) developed a planning consciousness of its own. As often as not, lay and professional agency leaders are not identified with the total system, and this continues to be a fundamental problem in Federation-agency relationships.

I certainly do not suggest that because Federations have power they inevitably have skill and wisdom. I have repeatedly made this point, and some of my colleagues are unhappy

with me about this. I have insisted that Federation has the primary responsibility for establishing appropriate structures and processes which foster constructive relationships. But the sad fact is that even where such structures and processes have been established, serious problems continue to stem from an inability on the part of agency leaders to face the realities of Federation as I discussed them in the paper.

It seems to me that I did indicate some guidelines on what agencies can do to make the idea of an ethnic system come alive. Such a system takes on meaning only through people, and the first requirement is that both lay and professional leaders of agencies regard themselves as part of the system. Another requirement would be the right of the total system, working appropriately with its key elements, to determine the objectives and functions of the system. Isn't one of the problems today the unwillingness or the inability of agency leaders to accept these basic assumptions?

I certainly agree that a great deal can be done by Federations and agencies to make the idea of an ethnic system come alive. But training and education, like charity, begin at home. The Center movement has the most to gain or lose from an appropriate handling of this problem. What is there to prevent JWB from doing part of the job with its lay and professional leadership?

In his course in logic and scientific method, Morris Raphael Cohen said that a great many arguments never are resolved because they stem from different basic assumptions which are not always made explicit. He added that there might be a great many differences but very few arguments if in any discussion of issues there would first be a clarification of basic assumptions. In any case, one of the nice things about discussing these problems with you is that one feels that he is involved in a real search for clarification and truth rather than in argument.

I look forward to more of this kind of discussion, which unfortunately doesn't take place often enough among the people most concerned. I think of the professional leaders in the Federation and Center fields who, as far as I can recall, have never come together to consider the issues in quite that way. Perhaps part of the problem is history, where discussions revolved around "who is top dog?" Today the Federation movement feels no need to belabor this issue. Its "power" and "authority" today are facts. These may not always be used to the best advantage of Federation and agency, and some people may be unhappy about it, but that doesn't eliminate the reality.

I hope we can talk more about this, and that the time will come when Federation and Center people can discuss the issue, particularly from the point of view of basic realities.

Charles Miller