

Some Notes on the *Madrich* — A Child-Care Worker in Israel

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There are many similarities between the American child-care worker and the madrich in Israel. There are, of course, many differences as well. These similarities and differences need to be seen with an historical perspective and against the current emphases in child welfare.

During a recent six-months stay in Israel, I had the opportunity to study some aspects of the social welfare system, particularly the major voluntary child welfare organization called "youth *Aliyah*. The focus of inquiry was child care personnel, especially the *madrich* who is an unique, Israeli form of male child-care worker. Youth *Aliyah* was interested in the possibility of receiving assistance to enhance its staff development and in-service training activities for the *madrich*. It was hoped that some lessons might be learned from the work of the Group Child-Care Consultant Services, School of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill which has specialized in this field for a number of years.

Visits were made to Youth *Aliyah* installations; lengthy discussions were held with staff members at all levels as well as with youth in care and all relevant publications were carefully reviewed. What follows are some observations on the organization, the *madrich* and in-service training, and comparisons between Israeli and United States practices and attitudes in child welfare.

Youth *Aliyah* has approximately 15,000 adolescents in care. These youngsters are placed in about 250 residential settings, including vocational training schools, youth villages, collective settlements and boarding schools, with only a small percentage living at home and attending day schools. The population served in any one residential setting ranges from 90 to 1,500, including youngsters who are not wards of Youth *Aliyah*.

Youth *Aliyah* was founded in 1934 by an American social worker, Henrietta Szold. Its original purpose was to rescue adolescents from Europe where their lives were threatened

by the Nazis. Since its inception, more than 140,000 wards have received care. Brought to what was then Palestine, the youth were largely placed in kibbutzim. Here, a systematic effort was made to prepare them for lives as pioneers and settlers in agricultural pursuits. The effort at preparation rested on a three-fold process of study, work and peer group socialization. The organization was permeated by a well-articulated socialistic and Zionist ideology to the degree that it was a "movement" with clear objectives and with highly motivated, idealistic personnel. The objective was not only to save children; it was also to create a new type of human being for a new society.

After about 20 years, the population served changed from children who needed to be rescued from Europe and whose parents perished in the Holocaust to native-born children whose parents are in Israel but who fall into the category of being "culturally deprived." These families are largely of Asian-African origin. As contrasted to families of European-American origin, their incomes are lower, family size larger, delinquency rates higher and educational achievement lower. They represent slightly more than half the population of Israel and are the object of a determined effort to close the gap between them and the families of European-American origin. Concern with this problem is at the very top of Israel's social agenda and provides the rationale for Youth *Aliyah's* current program. This emphasis is in keeping with a social policy decision made by the Israeli government in 1975 to stress during 1976 and 1977 those services and programs which have direct influence on ameliorating the conditions

of the deprived population.

In addition to serving a changed population today, the objectives of Youth *Aliyah* have also changed. The aim is no longer to prepare children for a life of agricultural pioneering in the collective settlements but rather to help underachievers acquire some vocational skills and some good work habits. This is a crucial part of the overall effort to bridge the differences between the Oriental and Occidental segments of Israeli society. The method of achieving the new aim has also changed. Work is no longer a necessary element in the youngster's experience while in care. Mechanization and industrialization have curtailed the need for unskilled work and valuing physical labor for its own sake is no longer accepted by the society at large and certainly not by its Oriental segment. Study now has precedence and, while peer group socialization remains a factor, it exists partly in reality and partly in nostalgia for the past when the youth community carried considerable responsibility for the adjustment of its members. The entire organization has shifted from an ideological movement to a formal, professionalized structure. "Cause" has been replaced by "function."

During the initial period of approximately 20 years, the central figure in the program was a male child-care worker, the *madrich*. He carried total responsibility for the children in his group. His concern for each youngster's adjustment required sensitivity to individual needs. This had to be combined with his responsibility for managing the group and inculcating the ideals and the values of group life on the *kibbutz*. The *madrich* served as an ego-ideal, a model to be emulated by the children. He was a leader, teacher, father, confidant, brother, coach, nursemaid, uncle, policeman, therapist, guide, counselor, social worker, psychologist and friend. The individual selected for this demanding assignment was drawn from the elite of *kibbutz* society. His successful life experience on the *kibbutz*, his enthusiasm, his devotion and his clear objectives made it possible for him to fulfill

this complex and difficult task despite his lack of formal preparation. He fulfilled his responsibilities through exemplary behavior and leadership.

Changes in Youth *Aliyah* have brought about changes in the role of the *madrich* and in the individuals selected to fill this role. He is no longer a prestigious figure, held in great esteem and serving the needs of society as well as the needs of children in care. Generally, he is a student for whom being a *madrich* represents a part-time job that he holds temporarily to help him with the financial problems of being a student. He has little, if any, sense of mission and he respects the superior status of the teacher in the school, often aspiring to that status himself. Responsibilities assigned to the teacher have been increased and this development tends to diminish the self-esteem of the *madrich*. He is not especially well paid and he tolerates the odd working hours (approximately 7:00-8:00 am, 12:00-1:00 pm. and 6:00-10:00 pm) because it fits his own schedule of attending university or taking some advanced course of study. The reward and the glamor of being a *madrich* has disappeared. Other staff members with better education and with more specific responsibilities have replaced the *madrich* in both prestige and function. His role is ambiguous and diffuse with one consequence being an over-emphasis on his custodial functions. Another consequence is the expectation that he will serve as a substitute father, drawing on his perceptions of a father's role as the model for his own activities.

Turnover among people filling the role of *madrich* is high. Many Israeli child welfare administrators feel that is desirable because they see the job as requiring a young person who can bear its frustrations for only a short time. Others, a distinct minority, value the maturity and experience of continued service as a *madrich*. This attitude, which is the exception rather than the rule, results in higher pay and higher prestige for some *madrichim*. More characteristically, the *madrich* is not well paid; sometimes, his salary is computed on the

basis of his job being a part-time one.

There are some efforts to offer in-service training to the *madrach*. These take the form of group meetings for new appointees to the job during their first year. These meetings are organized by the central office of Youth *Aliyah* and involve staff members from several different institutions. In each institution individually, on-the-job supervision is not well developed. The *madrach* usually has someone to whom he may turn if he has trouble but there is little on-going review of the work aimed toward improving his knowledge and skill. Moreover, there is little capability for providing such educational supervision within each individual institution.

There are many similarities between the American child-care worker and the *madrach* in Israel. There are, of course, many differences as well. These similarities and differences need to be seen with an historical perspective and against the current emphases in child welfare. In the United States, we do not have a record of development from high to low prestige for child-care workers. The occupation was always relatively low in prestige and continues to be that way. In both countries, increasing current emphasis in the society on material and personal achievement profoundly affects the esteem—or lack of esteem—for child-care workers.

There is an interesting difference with respect to the attitude towards employing married couples as houseparents. We tend to consider this to be a desirable arrangement, particularly in institutions for dependent and neglected children. The Israelis, by contrast, do not employ a husband and wife to serve the same group of children. This is deliberately avoided based on the argument that having two people not married to each other gives the youngster more latitude and a greater opportunity for help. There is a female counterpart for the *madrach* and she is sometimes referred to as a housemother. More commonly, she is known as the *metapelet* which is best translated as "caretaker." However, she is not the wife of the *madrach* and he is never

referred to as the house-father.

Still another difference between the two countries is the attitude toward schooling for youngsters in care. Many American institutions prefer to send the children to public schools in the community, unless their behavior is so disruptive that the public school will not accept them. The Israelis provide schooling in the residential setting. This tends to make the focus of the residential setting educational rather than social work. One interesting consequence is the fact that the child welfare leadership of the country generally and of Youth *Aliyah* particularly is drawn largely from the field of education.

One salient difference between the two countries lies in the attitude toward residential care of children in need. The Israelis perceive our attitude as being one in which we assert that the worst family is better than the best institution, even though we recognize that some children must be removed from the home and offered residential care. They believe, on the other hand, that residential care is desirable, especially for adolescents who are having adjustment difficulties which, as they see it, cannot be resolved in the environment where these difficulties are being expressed and possibly caused. The Israelis hold that the institution can provide a "powerful environment" which replaces the undesirable home environment and which gives a new locus in which change can best take place.

In both countries, the need for staff development and in-service training is considerable. Providing such learning opportunities in itself can contribute to raising the prestige level of the work since it conveys a sense of its importance and value. This and other forms of recognition are essential if able individuals to be attracted to child-care work in both countries. Such efforts should take into account the likelihood that, by and large, reality dictates a continuation of the present situation with respect to salary and prestige levels. The lack of rewards and the lack of a clear, coherent transmissible body of knowledge work against the professionalization of

child-care workers in both countries. Accordingly, we need considerable ingenuity and creativity in recruiting, selecting and training

people to fill the vital front-line role of child-care worker in America and *madrach* in Israel.