

Jewish Education in the Jewish Community Center*

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. . . (this article begins) *with a definition of the goals of Jewish education as a means of introducing the Jewish community center as an important partner in achieving these goals; (then describes) . . . some environmental factors that gave the Center potential and . . . (identifies) some of its traditional services; (and concludes) . . . with three unique models that contribute to Jewish education: experiential, interventive and ethnic counselling.*

THERE was a time when the subject matter of this presentation would not have been possible. In the past, the attention of Jewish community centers was focused on the more circumscribed function of imparting Jewish "content." Today, such a Center purpose suggests a broader and less inhibited perception of the Jewish education function within the Jewish community center. To set the stage for this presentation, a working definition of Jewish education is in order. This is provided by an amalgam of thoughts expressed at meetings of the Jewish Welfare Board Commission on Maximizing Jewish Educational Effectiveness in Jewish Community Centers.

Jewish education is a lifelong process requiring Jewish knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. In a communal sense, it is an organized and community sanctioned system of imparting knowledge in a way that inspires Jewish pride. Ideally, it is a planful and purposeful process to influence Jewishly the mind, heart and mentality or knowledge, emotions and attitudes. We can no longer subscribe to the assumption that the responsibility for the development of a sense of Jewish identity lies only in the home and family, not in the Jewish school or agency. Jewish education is hollow without influencing the character of the individual's Jewish commitment. The goal of Jewish education is to help the individual

translate knowledge and pride into personal patterns of living to strengthen Jewish identity and perpetuate Jewish life.

In years past, the concept of Jewish education was envisioned in narrower terms, as being the province exclusively of Jewish institutions that were traditionally identified with education. Today, we understand a broad range of influences that can have meaningful impact on people's minds, hearts and mentality. Within such a more flexible perspective, I believe the Jewish community center has emerged as a significant institution in discharging the Jewish education function, particularly in terms of the numbers we serve, where they are at when they begin, the comprehensive character of the services rendered, and the documentable impacts that are effected.

There was also a time when Jewish community centers were criticized for not being Jewish enough. Today, we are berated because we took this criticism to heart and became more Jewish. This suggests that there is no longer equivocation about the primacy of Jewish purposes. Professional staff and lay leadership are uniformly accepting of the Jewish mission. While problems of attracting staff that is Jewishly literate still persist, we must also recognize that when there is commitment, even without scholarship, there is motivation to identify content and to exercise re-

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sourcefulness to import and infuse into the program significant elements of Jewish education.

Why our Potential is so Great

1. The Jewish community center is now considered a form of Jewish affiliation. Many Centers report that up to fifty percent of their Jewish constituency is unaffiliated with a temple or synagogue. Almost twenty percent of the entire Jewish population belong to Jewish community centers and when we consider participation statistics, I would estimate that forty percent of the Jewish population are or have in some way been touched by Jewish community center services.

2. The Center is universal and democratic and it appeals to neutrality. There are no strings to its relationships. It is even ecumenical (by including non-Jews.) The easiest Jewish doors to walk through are those of the Jewish community center. For marginal Jews, it offers easy non-demanding access and there is nothing more socially acceptable or all-American than going to a Y; even the non-Jews do it.

3. People still have conflicts with religion. Whether they be due to a reaction to parochialism, self-hatred, a dogmatic upbringing, family hypocrisy; whatever the dynamics that created it, there is a significant segment of inexpressive or closet Jews who haven't the slightest interest or readiness to participate in a program or institution that is overtly religious. The Jewish community center is penetrating this "market".

4. We offer two forms of "Introductory Judaism" that is appealing and successful. a) Communal Judaism: participating in processes that stimulates one to worry about Jewish programs and institutions is in itself an important beginning form of Jewish expression.

Jewish service with other Jewish people in behalf of a Jewish agency with Jewish purposes and giving *Tzedakah* while doing it, provides without question, a significant point of entry into Jewish life for many Jewish people. b) Easy Access Jewish Activities: family holiday celebrations, workshops to teach families how to practice Jewish customs in their homes, a class in Hebrew, a Jewish song circle, Israel folk dancing, etc., may be more than typical Center activities. Looking beyond the package to the contents, they represent for many people a safe and secure introduction into Jewish life. We believe some of these people advance on to other forms of Jewish expression, e.g. joining a synagogue or temple and prayer.

In thinking about these two forms of introductory Judaism, let us all remember to mark on a curve. Who is here that would say it is more important to advance a serious student of Jewish study from *Chumash* to *Talmud* then taking an uneducated Jew and giving him a class in elementary Hebrew?

5. Early Childhood Education: for a three or four year-old child, the nursery school in the Jewish community center represents his first experience in a group as a member of a majority. Many may never again be in this position and it is clear that this beginning group experience represents a positive beginning association with his Jewishness by appealing to the power of his senses. If what psychologists tell us are true, namely, that much of personality is formed by the age of three, then this impact gets assimilated into his basic gestalt and may sustain him in the years ahead.

6. American Jewish Committee Study. In a special monograph issued by the American Jewish Committee in 1976 involving some of the best minds in this country on both a professional

and lay level, a number of conclusions on the evaluation of the Jewish education system in this country included a prescription for more retreats, more informal education, more camping, and so forth. If one were to look at this report carefully, it almost appears as a syllabus for Jewish community center programming. It is clear that there needs to be greater emphasis on the affective, experiential, emotional and attitudinal components and the JCC is one resource that has been pre-eminent in this area.

Traditional Program Tracks

The following are five traditional Jewish program tracks associated with Jewish community centers:

1. Classes for adults which generally fall under the rubric of Informal Jewish Education. (It is interesting to note that classes with similar subject matter for children are catalogued as Formal Jewish Education.) The curriculum of classes offered in Centers include subjects in Hebrew, History, Jesus and the Jews, Mysticism, Talmud, Medrash, Yiddish, the Jewish Life Cycle, the Anatomy of the Jewish Community, the World of our Fathers, etc.
2. Jewish Interest Classes such as Cooking and Israeli Dancing.
3. Jewish Cultural Programs which include Israeli Art Shows, Hebrew Poetry Reading, Jewish Plays, Jewish Film Series, etc.
4. Jewish Public Affairs Program on topical issues to help people become more informed Jewishly and to give them a forum to express themselves on Jewish issues.
5. Resident Scholar Programs. In one Center a five track program with a Resident Scholar has been developed covering a two-year pe-

riod and is worthy of mention. It includes seminars: a) For Jewish leadership, "Jewish Learning—An Invitation to Meet the World." b) For young families, "Evolving a Jewish Philosophy of Life and Living It." c) For teenagers, "How Do I Explain My Jewish Religion to Others?" d) For professional staff, "Jewish Roots As Sources for Jewish Communal Service." e) For Jewish educators, "Making Jewish Texts Topical in Jewish Education."

These are five traditional kinds of programmatic tracks that have been evident in Jewish community centers in recent years. I would now like to present three unique models of service that give the Jewish community center a distinct role and opportunity in the area of Jewish education. They are Experiential Jewish Education, Interventive Jewish Education and Ethnic Counselling.

Experiential Education. This method of Jewish education focuses on the affective rather than the cognitive—where learning comes from living and where knowledge is caught as well as taught. This kind of Jewish education includes opportunities supplementary to and independent of the classroom for meaningful Jewish living experiences where the joys of Judaism can be absorbed and valued through interpersonal enrichment. Illustrations include: a) Shabbat and holiday workshops to teach people how to express themselves Jewishly in their homes; b) A Ruach on Wheels program where a staff team goes into a neighborhood and specific homes and teaches the neighborhood and the home how to create an ambiance to celebrate a Jewish holiday; c) A Chassidic wedding where all the children in camp join together to create the environment and

lead up to the final dramatic presentation of a Chassidic wedding; d) Retreats which focus on the Shabbat spirit where people could let their hair down from the tumult and pressures of business; e) Chavurah Groups or Jewish Family Friendship Circles to help people in an informal setting explore their Jewish awareness and consider opportunities for Jewish growth.

Interventive Education. Some of the most effective Jewish education programs are those that are not planned but happen as a result of the sensitivity of a skilled professional. Educators call it a "teachable moment," social workers call it "intervention with intentionality;" we used to call it having your antennae out—picking up on the signals. Fritz Redl referred to it as "life space interviewing"—maximizing the therapeutic opportunities of the moment. The opportunities are endless because people reveal who they are and where they are at in living situations. Some examples include: a) the girl's club rejecting a Jewish name for their group because it is embarrassing to them and the worker picking up and stimulating dialogue; b) the teenage group that does not want to participate in an agency wide Jewish program because "we don't feel anything for it now nor does our family, and besides it happened 2,000 years ago," and the worker picking up and stimulating dialogue; c) the child, teenager or adult who communicates a stereotypic attitude about Jews, and the worker picking up and stimulating dialogue; d) the committee member who reminds us "This isn't Sunday School, we're here to have fun," and the worker picking up and stimulating dialogue; e) the staff worker who wants to know why he is the only one in the agency whose Jewish skills are being assessed in his evaluation and the worker picking up and

stimulating dialogue; f) A classic illustration of interventive Jewish education and the professional with skill:

In the teenage lounge there exists two flags which are always there, one an Israeli flag, one an American flag. Two teenagers enter the lounge and the worker overhears one asking the other whether it is a Jewish holiday or not and if that is the reason the Jewish flag is in the lounge. The worker comments that the two flags were always in the lounge. The same teenager wondered why both flags were necessary and why the American flag wasn't enough. The worker makes the simple comment, "I notice you are asking about the Jewish flag and not the American flag, I wonder why?" A provocative discussion ensues.

Interventive education is, while informal and unplanned, an essential component and competency in Jewish education because it capitalizes on life's natural processes when feelings and attitudes are exposed and the subject has already been introduced. So much more can be extracted from these teachable moments, and in these situations we do not have to coerce kids to go to school or adults to take a class and we do not have to do curriculum planning.

Ethnic Counselling. Judith Klein's book, *Jewish Identity and Self-Esteem: Healing Wounds Through Ethno-Therapy* is one of a number recently published. The term ethno-therapy was coined by Dr. Price Cobbs; it describes a clinical model which seeks positive personal change through changing negative attitudes about ethnicity and race. Simply stated, how you feel about your ethnic background has a direct relationship to how you feel about yourself. Jewish community centers, by virtue of their emphasis on group work and their mission of strengthening Jewish identity have offered variations of models of group processes and self-exploration within the scope of their services. Ethno-therapy should be one of the

primary methods of fostering Jewish identity and stimulating Jewish education within the group-focused setting of the Jewish community center. Through the use of creative consciousness-raising exercises, participants are helped to explore themselves as Jews, to understand their conflicts and sort out their problems as Jews, to evolve a philosophy as Jews and to set goals for their own Jewish development. These programs generally attract searching Jews, often unaffiliated, ambivalent and desirous of some change. Unlike the rabbi giving his sermon about going to *shul* to shul-goers, this kind of program tends to attract the very population it is designed to influence.

The full curriculum of exercises and techniques utilized in ethnic counselling is too extensive to detail. In my own agency, we sponsor a workshop entitled, "In Search of Self—A Learning Laboratory in Jewish Self-Discovery." Here is but a sample of what we do:

1. We role play teenagers debating a question asked of them by intelligent Christian teenagers: How would you define your Jewishness? Do our Jewish kids have the words to help them think about what being a Jew means? Is teaching young people articulation skills for Jewish self-definition an important aspect of Jewish education? Do we give enough attention to the dialectic component in Jewish education? I am embarrassed to say that I believe that intelligent Jewish kids, even those with a strong Jewish education, including a day school education, are conspicuously deficient in this area.
2. We use a Jewish life-line exercise with an up-and-down graph to portray one's Jewish development

with ten-year intervals on the life-line. People do the graph and then explain their curves in relation to their personal development. It generally inspires soul searching discussion.

3. Besides prioritization, multiple choice, sentence completion, ethical wills and cathartic exercises, we do free association questions.
4. Here are some of the effective questions that stimulate self-exploration: a) After a simple quiz—we ask the question: What is the minimum amount of knowledge you believe a Jewish person should have to be a responsible Jew? We then ask participants to measure themselves against their own yardsticks. b) Does being more Jewish mean having less fun? c) To what do you attribute self-hatred among Jews? d) Can the people in your family identify a distinct Jewish philosophy that characterizes your home? e) What Jewish practices were performed in your parent's home that you have discontinued? f) The reverse of this question: What practices have you initiated that were never part of your parent's home? g) Do some Jews take Judaism for granted? h) What do you think of the term *shvartze*? i) How do you explain G-d to children? j) Why can't some people believe in G-d? and so forth.

These are but a few of the many questions and exercises that comprise this model of service that probes the heart and soul. It could be argued that ethnic counselling is primarily psychological in form and content. But just as we recognize the psychosomatic syndrome—the effect of mind on body—so too must we appreciate the relationship between mind and soul. Not unlike the therapeutic model which

deals with feelings blocking insight as basic to therapy, so too must we understand and deal with feelings related to Jewish learning as basic to Jewish education.

In Conclusion

I began with a definition of the goals of Jewish education as a means of introducing the Jewish community center as an important partner in achieving these goals. I described some environmental factors that gave the Center potential and I identified some of its traditional services. I concluded with three unique models that contribute to Jewish education: experiential, interventive and ethnic counselling. I opted not to focus this presentation on the issue of "turf" even as I recognize that when one discusses Jewish education in a place like the Jewish community center this issue must inevitably surface. To dodge it is to lead with one's chin. It is a complex and vexing issue deserving of fuller, independent discussion. Having said this, I still cannot resist an editorial quote that was part of a presentation made at a meeting

of the Jewish Welfare Board Commission on maximizing Jewish educational effectiveness related to this issue and to achieving the most effective Jewish education in the community.

A community gameplan or blueprint should be adopted by the central agency assessing needs and formulating objectives and the gameplan should be adapted to the players. Flexibility must be the key to mobilizing Jewish educational efforts in a given community. Professional personnel and agency resources should be used portably and interchangeably. Emphasis should be placed on effectiveness not auspices. The determination and distribution of services should be based solely on the best opportunities to meet needs and goals.

While this may seem idealistic, I recall a *Medrash* taught to me many years ago. We are warned that one should not open a store across the street where such a store already exists because the competition may destroy one's *parnoseh* (living.) When the question arose about building a yeshiva across the street from another yeshiva, the rabbis tell us; "in Torah there is no competition." I believe our system of education would better be served if we could all capture the spirit of this *Medrash*.