Perspective in Jewish Education*

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. . . real expertise, combined with a cooperative approach, will give Boards of Jewish Education a position of strength otherwise unattainable. (Cooperation and coordination, however, do not mean necessarily the same thing as centralization. If you are the central agency, does that mean everyone else is on the periphery?)

THE best response to the stresses of any job is to analyze the sources of that stress, decide whether they are real, external or self-generated and then posit responses based on the analysis. Do you have alternatives? What are they? Can you mitigate the stresses by changing the situation or your goals?

Using this approach, let us look at the critical factors affecting Jewish education, the environment and parameters in which planners and educators work. The general American society is open and voluntary, with competing attractions. Within that society, we have a highly educated, yet Jewishly illiterate population. Ironically, while not appreciating the true depth of its Jewish illiteracy, this population demands and defines quality for the Jewish education of its children—when it deigns to provide such an education.

Furthermore, Jewish education has the least clarity, generates the most passion and is the most complicated of all areas of Jewish community concerns. For example, it does not deal with areas of pathology as do family service agencies, so people feel differently about Jewish education's less immediate, emergency nature. It involves a large number of individuals often in competition or conflict: rabbis, teachers, principals, parents, children and adults. It is the only service area with competing institutional approaches: day schools, supplementary and congregational schools, independent and community institutions, formal and informal, and so forth. There is no sole provider of Jewish education as there is to meet family service needs. (Federations cannot be equated with the total community. Boards of Jewish Education cannot be equated with the total educational community). Jewish education is accepted as so vital to our tradition and continuity that someone, somewhere, will argue that every and any suggested approach is acceptable and therefore necessary, regardless of the cost and advice of cooler minds.

These are only some of the factors which contribute to the general frustration in the Jewish educational environment. We often aggravate ourselves by personalizing or institutionalizing them in the forms of: short-sighted parents (the get-them-Bar-Mitzvahed or is-it-convenient-for-the-car-pool syndrome); non-representative, short term, and uninformed board members; time- and money-pressed supplementary schools led by generally committed, but all too often, less than adequately trained personnel; self-contained

* A modified version of remarks presented to the Fellowship of the Board of Jewish Education Directors on December 27, 1983. The theme of the conference was "The Bureau Director in a Political Pressure Cooker". In preparing these remarks, I consulted with many colleagues in Federations and BJEs, circulated a questionnaire, and reviewed the salient literature. Special thanks to my colleagues in the Task Force on Jewish Education of the Social Planners Group of the Council of Jewish Federations particularly Dr. Joseph Harris and Richard Sipser. I am solely responsible for the recommendations generated by this process.

and/or halachically isolating day schools where ideological commitment, by default, substitutes for pedogogical training; and a community leadership trying to make community decisions while faced with too many needs and too few funds.

Insights and Direction

If we accept this general description of the North American Jewish educational world, some insights and directions begin to appear. However, they necessitate learning to deal with ambiguity and complexity; to work with parents and other resources in the educational process; to become competitive and attractive; and to respond quickly and innovatively to the total community and educational environments.

The insights and directions which I will suggest could further diffuse an already difficult situation, particularly if one accepts the historic BJE mandate. Traditional BJE responses to the American Jewish educational situation are very well outlined in Bulletin 47 of the American Association of Jewish Educators. One could group George Pollack's 52 different BJE functions into five general areas: *professional service*—(teacher related); *community services*—(lay leadership); *school services*—(schools and consultation); *administration*—(agency and overhead) and possibly, *Teacher Center/library*. Or more simply: education programming, community services, and education services.

The vast majority of BJE functions are reflective of a traditional child in the classroom orientation and of the history of the BJE concept. Cognitive issues appear to be of primary importance. Most BJE energy is directed toward classroom-related functions. Much of the BJE professional's perspective of the Jewish educational world naturally grows out of the struggle to perform this job well, despite all the obstacles.

Most social planners are sensitive to the various pressures and frustrations faced by BJE personnel. However, they cannot always respond as educators would like, or at times, as they would like.

From my perspective, budget and planning professionals have much less authority than is often assumed, particularly less than BJE directors have. The role of laymen in the Federation budget and planning process is greatly underestimated by beneficiary agency colleagues. In my opinion, there is greater lay input in Federation than in Bureaus, despite all the prostestations to the contrary. The professional "mysteries" of education and social welfare agencies appear to militate against the inclusion of lay people into substantive policy issues or discussions in those agencies.

A major part of a budget and planning professional's job is to facilitate and support lay decision-making. Social planners, to be at all successful in this context, must be technocrats, people persons, and *tachlitically* oriented. Planners are required to take a global overview, because of the number of service areas addressed, the numbers of agencies served, and the finite dollars available to meet needs.

This planning role entails balancing within the context of Jewish tradition and fiscal reality the pressures from and needs of competing groups advocating, for example, long- or short-range needs, old vs. young, agency vs. agency, service area vs. service area, fad vs. tradition or local vs. overseas. Everyone else's constituencies become the social planner's. Add fundraising obligations to these responsibilities. The result is a view of services from different angles, with various agendas. The effect is that a social planner's perspectives on Jewish education

both parallel and diverge from those of BJE directors.

Social Planning and Education

A social planner's perspectives on Jewish education are grounded in Jewish tradition, fiscal reality, the politics of community decision making, and a plethora of sometimes contradictory information. The social planner is concerned primarily with the planning issues of Jewish education and only tangentially with Jewish educational issues. This is the difference between community planning and educational planning.

This point was underscored during discussions at the productive first meeting of the working group on Jewish education of the Social Planners Group of the Council of Jewish Federations held at the 1983 General Assembly. Among the issues raised were: demographics; the effects of the economy; reaching a larger constituency; agency networking locally and nationally; clearer definition of the various national education roles and functions of BJE, Federations and the various national education bodies; funding; research; government relations; and the use of advanced technology in curriculum development. What do these issues mean to a social planner?

Demography in the area of Jewish education means to a planner not only declining enrollment in supplementary schools and the philosophical issues of consolidation, but also the problem of transitional neighborhoods with the effect on capital investments and the impact on synagogue survival. It can also raise the question of Jewish women being lost as a pool of potential teachers and educators.

The effects of the economy mean not only the rising cost of education due to increased energy, transportation and personnel costs, but the potential of only an elite, affluent group being able to afford any quality Jewish education. The economy, therefore, could exacerbate divisions within the Jewish community in the next generation. It could lead to further deterioration of Jewish education and a potential shift to the religious right in teaching staffs in some day schools. Furthermore, it creates the potential for unhealthy funding schemes by synagogues and day schools desiring to limit deficits or forestall bankruptcy.

Funding is not only a matter of allocating money, but of asking: To whom? How much? For what? How do you allocate, assuring some accountability without destroying incentive and autonomy? How can the Federation support Jewish education while not diminishing the role of the family, the synagogue and the school as first resorts? If it is true that the American Jewish community spends around $500 million on Jewish education, is the primary issue not increased funding, but rather better direction?

I could go on, but I think the point is made that while the goals of planners and educators are generally the same, the perspectives are somewhat different; therefore, immediate concerns, actions, and responses differ.

Planning for the Future

Long-term planning issues should be separate from budget or crisis management issues. However, the respective roles of planners and educators, and consequently their relationships, tend to be too bound up in funding and not with the issues which effect education on a long-term community basis. On these issues there should be ongoing dialogue and consultation.

For a BJE to become a true partner in a community planning process, how-

ever, it must take a more global overview than is currently done. This means a separation of its service delivery, evaluation, planning functions and structures. It calls for co-opting different constituencies. It requires a review of community goals, objectives and needs toward developing a wide spectrum eductional response to Jewish needs.

These suggested changes in BJE activities developed in response to a number of issues raised in discussions and through a questionnaire circulated to social planners. They are complex and inter-related: the issue of providing educational leadership and/or service, for one, touches upon the situation of BJEs being non-funding evaluators. Another issue, the role of a BJE as part of a community service system, touches upon BJE/Federation and BJE/sister agency relations. All these points lead me to a somewhat different view of a BJE and its director's role.

The issue of leadership in service is probably one of the most frustrating areas for agency directors. Agencies advocate, plan and provide direct services, only to become caught in the bind of being both provider and evaluator while generally not being funders. To deal with the complexity of conflicting roles and the competing needs of other educational institutions, there has been a tendency to develop approaches perceived by supplementary and day school professionals, rabbis, and other non-BJE educators as inflexibility, disinterestedness or empire building.

This creates a dynamic of pressure and counter-pressure, a raising of the ante, leading on occasions to negative feelings toward and from the Federation. BJE complaints of lack of clout or Federation support shared with givers can backfire. Funding expectations raised by a BJE, but unconfirmed by a Federation, can place the Federation in an awkward position of having to say no when yes is expected. The effects on giving and goodwill can be especially hard-hitting to BJEs, which receive the majority of their budgets from Federations.

Funded vs. Funding

Another issue is that of being a funded agency and not being a funding agency. It is greater error for a non-funding agency to operate in a coercive manner which could be perceived by highly sensitive colleagues as out of keeping with the reality of power or capacity to deliver quality services.

I have learned by experience that one should never try to be what one is not. I recommend instead the jujitsu approach: recognize your weaknesses and their weaknesses and use them. I maintain that real expertise, combined with a cooperative approach, will give BJEs a position of strength otherwise unattainable. (Cooperation and coordination, however, do not mean necessarily the same thing as centralization. If you are the central agency, does that mean everyone else is on the periphery?) Trying this approach can make up a great deal for the lack of direct financial clout.

Learning to Change

This approach also suggests a modification in the general perception of the BJE role. Instead of being viewed as a major, but still only one of many, Jewish educational institutions, BJEs should co-opt the position of being the community building organization which concentrates on Jewish education as its specific vehicle. This would not affect the stress on scholarship or cognitive values. Rather, BJE goals and objectives would be enlarged. Goals could be articulated in familiar terms—Jewish con-

tinuity and identity through Jewish knowledge.

Some of the clear effects on BJE activities would be increased concentration on post-Bar Mitzvah groups and the use of non-traditional, non-classroom, non-child oriented approaches such as camping, retreats, lecture forums, public or cable TV, increased parent education or contracts, or any form of confluent education.

This approach will have the positive effect of expanding constituencies for Jewish education and potentially creating more supporters for BJEs.

In this context I suggest that the challenge of a BJE is not solely or simply to see that children are educated better in a classroom, but rather to develop ways by which the injection of a Jewish educational component in all areas and at all levels will respond to and contribute to the alleviation of various Jewish problems.

I call this complementary education, to differentiate it from supplementary. BJEs can be the sources or distributors of study units, lecture services, articles, TV programs, materials for the general public or teachers, communal professionals and rabbis. The subject matter can include, among others, the issues of Jewish attitudes towards the family, marriage and divorce. In addition to transmitting material, more subtle objectives can be met, such as to strengthen attitudes towards marriage and children, to help children of divorced parents with their situation, and to sensitize the community at large toward caring and creative responses. "Home Start" is a good example of this approach. Other similar topics for BJE activity can be: the elderly, drugs, sexual attitudes, and environmental issues.

This suggestion incorporates the expansion of the BJE role beyond the traditional educational/classroom role to social welfare. It requires close and collegial coordination with social welfare agencies and rabbinic groups. It requires working with larger community planning issues and bodies. It assumes that funding will be forthcoming for such programs when presented within the context of larger community priorities.

Such programs, when done well, can enlarge a BJE's constituency of supporters, provide it with a type of credibility not yet available and give a BJE the financial wherewithal to do what it now considers appropriate and primary.

It should be noted that an aspect of being a Jewish community building organization is the use of the consensual approach. How does a desire for consensus and the use of the process in decision-making relate to standards and standard-setting or the establishing of salary scales? Recognizing and accepting the implications distinguishing standard-setting and standard development will go a long way toward minimizing areas of conflict and stress. Every case or institution or problem should be approached individually, or at least be given the impression of doing so. There should be a willingness to share input, recognize autonomy, and respect dignity. Jewish educators understand the institutional implications of the biblical expression, "Train a child according to its direction." (Prov. 22:6).

This point is underscored by the fact that most issues raised in a questionnaire I circulated among colleagues in education are not programmatic, but attitudinal. Performance quality of BJEs is only rarely questioned. The questions that do surface are: Why are these the jobs that BJEs choose to do? Why do BJEs do the jobs they do in the way they do? How do BJEs make decisions? and Who has input? Furthermore, there is a call in the questionnaire for BJEs to be open and willing to generate, create and maintain relationships with the broader

Jewish community and in particular with the rest of the Jewish educational community.

In Closing

One last comment addressed directly to BJE directors, their role, and their thematic pressure cooker.

I suspect that, when they entered *Ḥinuh*, they did not plan on the types of responsibilities they now have or the types of skills they demand.

They would be more comfortable, feel less in a pressure cooker, and in my opinion, be more successful if they would recognize what they are and what they are not, and act and prepare themselves accordingly.

While they advocate for all Jewish educators, it is counter-functional to group themselves solely with them. Obviously, while they are *Meḥanḥim*, they would not consider themselves *Melamdim,* with all that term's negative connotations. Nor should they view themselves primarily as teachers or as principals. They are agency heads with all the roles and all the responsibilities and implications thereof, without the final decision-making authority, the universal predicament of all Jewish communal workers.

They must become comfortable in and able to use the political, managerial, budgeting and supervisory skills which were not taught in teachers college, but which are demanded by their position and by their relationship to Federations. If they do not have them, they must acquire them along with the vocabulary that recognizes the difference between educational administration and administration, between the authority figure of a teacher and the collegial nature of a friendly guide.

I have suggested a modification in BJE goals, in techniques and a clarification of a BJE director's self-perception. I further suggest continuation of this type of dialogue on a national level. I maintain that these suggestions would help BJEs in their relations with constituencies and Federations.

I conclude in a Talmudic vein. Some of what I have said can be framed in terms of the discussion between Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah. To paraphrase:

Rabbi Tarfon—*I wonder if anyone in our generation knows how to accept criticism?*

Rabbi Elazar—*I wonder if anyone knows how to give it?*

If what they said was true 1900 years ago, it is also true in our day, when not only personal, but institutional egos and institutional memories are involved.