

WHENCE HORNSTEIN?

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In the mid-1960s there began a dramatic reorienting of Jewish communal priorities from defense and Israel's survival to the strengthening of Jewish identity. A new kind of professional, one trained not only as a social worker but also as a Jew, was needed to enable the fulfillment of this new mission. The Hornstein Program bucked the tradition of non-ideological, non-directive social work by integrating a Jewish and professional component into its training program.

The Hornstein Program was, to put it simply and bluntly, ahead of the curve—and, perhaps, it actually helped generate the curve that by now the larger community has definitively taken.

How so?

There are Jews, and there is Judaism. By “Jews,” I mean the individual Jew; in the aggregate, the body of the Jewish people. By “Judaism,” I mean the stories of the Jewish people, the stories we have received that are an amalgam of our texts and of the ways in which a hundred generations of Jews have lived. By “Judaism,” therefore, I mean that incorporeal element that is passed on from generation to generation—call it, if you will, the mind or the soul or the spirit of the Jews.

Jews, the body; Judaism, the spirit. In the Hebrew language, the distinction between body and spirit or soul does not exist. The word “nefesh” means soul—and body. A *choleh nefesh* is a mentally ill person, a person who is sick to his soul, and *chesbon nefesh* means soul-searching, but *pikuach nefesh* means life-saving, *nefesh met* means a corpse, and when demographic statistics report on, say, the number of persons per household, they use the word *nefashot*, the plural of *nefesh*—persons. And *nifesh*, the verb form, means to breathe life into, to animate. Ancient Hebrew, in short, saw only one category where we see two: *nefesh* means the human

essence, body and spirit as one. It means therefore what we understand by the word “life.”

The traditional path of entry into Jewish communal service pre-Hornstein was via social work, a field that was insistently opposed to concern for Judaism's soul. In part a therapeutic profession, always committed to non-directive, non-ideological interventions, it dealt with the personal and social needs of Jewish bodies—that is, of Jews as individuals. In that orientation, it was entirely compatible with the organized community that sustained it, whose concern was the material needs of individual Jews in distress. In retrospect, it is easy to understand why this was so. In the context of the time, a time long before government assumed responsibility for social welfare, before Social Security, before aid for refugee resettlement, before Medicare and Medicaid, before college loan programs, there was no extra-communal agency prepared to respond to pressing human needs. *Im ein kemach*—if there is no bread, *ein Torah*—there is no Torah. The immediate needs of the body for survival take precedence over the needs of the person for spiritual sustenance.

The community's survival? Back then, the threat was anti-Semitism, a threat against the Jewish body in the aggregate. Create, therefore, defense agencies, create as well settlement houses where Jews would learn how to be Americans. Acceptance by the gentile society was the dominant issue (not exclusive, but dominant) on the American Jewish communal agenda, and it remained

Leonard Fein, a writer and social activist, was the first director of the Hornstein Program, a fact usually and quite appropriately forgotten.

the dominant issue through the Second World War. Our basic strategy, a strategy enthusiastically embraced by the social workers who staffed our Centers and, be it emphasized, who often led our federations and other agencies, was to insist on the fundamental non-difference of Jews from non-Jews, to encourage the avoidance of Hamlet's question, to propose instead that we could both be and not be at one and the same time.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, as anti-Semitism became utterly disreputable, and as we advanced to the head of the educational and economic class, and as the government moved ever more massively into the field of welfare, some adjustments were called for. What with our own declining need for help and government's growing responsibility for such help as we did need, the driving purpose of the organized community had been largely accomplished.

But old organizations neither die nor fade away. Typically, they unearth new purposes to justify their existence. Our community might have finally turned its corporate attention to the spiritual health of America's Jews—that is to say, Judaism. All along after all, there had been those who had called attention to our crisis of the spirit, and now it seemed we had at last the freedom, the luxury, to do something about that crisis.

But there were reasons to stay away from that crisis. The social workers who largely managed our community were in the main neither interested nor qualified to confront it. Moreover, to acknowledge the crisis of the spirit would have forced them to confront exceedingly discomfiting questions that they had spent a century and more trying to avoid and evade, fundamental questions of Jewish purpose: What does it mean to be a Jew in an era of unbelief? Are we, in fact, different from others—and if so, in what ways? And if not, why invest so passionately in Jewish continuity? How and why, aside from the fact that we share common enemies, am I connected to other Jews as I am not connected to other human beings?

Tough questions, these. Better to evade them—that is, to deny the crisis—than, know-

ing that there may be no answer, to engage with them.

To hide a big question, you need a big diversion.

As luck would have it, during the same years in which the various threats to the American Jewish body were receding—during the years, in other words, when we might have turned our attention to these nagging questions of the spirit, to the evident attrition of a sense of Jewish purpose, of a Jewish motive—the overseas threats to the Jewish body, first in Europe, then of course in Israel, emerged and became our central focus. In the wake of the Holocaust and in the presence of Israel's perils, Jewish adrenaline began pumping again; a new motive for Jewish life emerged.

Israel's emergency came as something of a relief to the organized community, for it enabled us to continue to raise funds on the grounds we knew best—Jews in distress—and to allocate those funds according to the least controversial criteria, the traditional criteria of physical emergency. And Israel's troubles enabled us to continue to avoid confronting the other agenda, the agenda of the spirit.

It can surely not be thought an accident that we did not come to that agenda in a coherent way until after the Six-Day War, when, for a brief while, Israel seemed suddenly secure and when, at virtually the same time, questions of Jewish identity and of Jewish continuity took on a new urgency in the wake of the first reports of a dramatic increase in the rate of intermarriage. More than any other issue, intermarriage reflected the intersection of the Jewish mind and the Jewish body, since it appeared that the confusions and inadequacies of the individual Jewish mind were leading directly to a serious hemorrhage from the collective Jewish body. (If we were to graph the proportion of federation allocations directed first at Jewish education and then, in more recent years, at other vehicles for the promotion of Jewish identity, we would immediately see that the mid-1960s marked the beginning of a new phase in federation history, a fairly dramatic reorien-

tation of federation priorities.)

Yet, the organized community of the 1960s was, for a variety of reasons, not ideally positioned to pursue creative solutions to spiritual questions. Its managers and traditional elites were uncomfortable with the questions, and the search for answers violated the principle of consensus that had traditionally informed the community. One can talk easily of spiritual needs or of educational deficits in the abstract, but when it come down to cases, we are dealing with a community in which there is simply no prevailing consensus on the definition of our spiritual needs or on the appropriate curricula for our educational efforts.

It is against that background that the Hornstein Program emerged. Plainly, if we were to grapple with this old-new set of questions, we needed a different kind of professional, a professional trained not only as a social worker but also as a Jew, functionally fluent in Jewish life and lore. Even the Jewish Community Centers, let alone the federations and other communal agencies, began—albeit sluggishly—to acknowledge the need. Their classic mission—Americanization—had been rendered obsolete. Health clubs and a smidgen of Israeliness could hardly suffice to warrant the continuing support of the community.

So, Hornstein, bucking the tradition. We worried, in those first years, about whether we'd be able to place our graduates. We

worried about how to cram all the material we thought relevant, from group work to Bible, into a two-year curriculum. We worried about whether we'd be able to attract really good students.

To all those worries, once those of us who were present at the birth realized that I was better at other things—almost any other thing, actually—than I was at managing the program, Bernard Reisman brought a distinctive style and substance, and also both infinite patience and energy. *His* Hornstein Program—and it very quickly became his—has long since gone well beyond those early concerns, has produced a generation and more of Jewish communal servants who, along with their peers from the kindred programs around the country, have quietly revolutionized the field and the community it serves.

Our community still depends too much on a sense of crisis. These days, we define the crisis as one of “continuity,” a wretchedly empty word that misstates the problem and thereby misdirects the solution. But insofar as the word suggests that a healthy community requires attention to both body and soul, to the Jewish people's *nefesh*, we are on a far more productive track. Few teachers I have known more eloquently demonstrate a concern for the *nefesh* of their students than Bernie Reisman; of few people can it as truly be said, “There goes a *ba'al nefesh*,” which my dictionary defines as “a man of feeling, soulful, with the right instincts.”