THE TRANSFORMATION OF JEWISH SOCIAL WORK

Bernard Reisman and the Hornstein Program at Brandeis University

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When the Hornstein program was launchd in 1969, its prospects for success were precarious. The Jewish community was ambivalent about the centrality of its Jewish identity and unconvinced of the need for Jewishly knowledgeable professionals, and the response of the Brandeis University faculty ranged from tepid to cold. In this unreceptive environment, Bernard Reisman recognized the potential of the program and brought it to fruition.

In 1964 Brandeis University announced the establishment of the Philip W. Lown Graduate Center for Contemporary Jewish Studies. When the program became operational in 1966 and I joined the Brandeis faculty as its director, we announced that one of its purposes was to provide education and training for a broad spectrum of Jewish communal professionals, to create a "Jewish civil service." That same year, a program for training Jewish social workers was inaugurated at the Los Angeles branch of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in conjunction with the School of Social Work of the University of Southern California. Both programs represented independent initiatives in a community still ambivalent about the centrality of its Jewish identity and unconvinced about the need for Jewishly knowledgeable professionals.

The field of Jewish social work—that is, social work conducted in agencies supported by Jewish philanthropic contributions—had a history reaching back to the late nineteenth century. The National Conference of Jewish Social Service had been organized in 1899. From the outset, the aim was to Americanize immigrants and to facilitate the transition from Old World particularism to full participation in contemporary society. Judaization was not on the agenda of the social agencies, and Jewish educational agencies had to fight for inclusion on the margins of the communal agenda.

A shortage of workers in the Jewish field led to the formation of a "Training School for Jewish Social Work" in 1925. In 1932, its name was changed to the Graduate School for Jewish Social Work. Its stated purpose was "to provide facilities for the initial training for Jewish social workers and to provide further training for such workers as are already in the field of Jewish social work" (*AJYB*, 1932–33, p. 189). Some believed that raising Jewish consciousness as well as professional skills should be the mandate of the school. In a 1936 article on "Twenty Five Years of Jewish Education in the United States," Israel Chipkin, a Jewish educator, wrote,

> The Jewish social and charitable agencies have experienced the need for workers whose training included not only general education and professional technique, but also more definite Jewish information, understanding and background....The existence of a professional school for Jewish social workers is further evidence of progress made toward Jewish community awareness and responsibility for the quality of Jewish group life in the democracy called the United States of America (*AJYB*, 1936–37).

In contrast to that view of a Jewish educator, Maurice Karpf, director of the school, chose

to emphasize only that the school "has materially influenced social work education in the United States" (*AJYB*, 1936–38, p. 117). Whatever the assessment, the school did not survive. The *American Jewish Year Book* of 1941–42 reports without explanation or comment that the Graduate School for Jewish Social Work suspended operations after 1939. The School never succeeded in persuading the Jewish community of the importance or even the value of Jewish social work. While social work education was essential, *Jewish* social work education, whatever that might mean, was unnecessary in a community focused on acculturation and integration. "Sectarianism," as Arnold Gurin (1966, p. 38) observed years later, remained "a persistent value dilemma."

In the post-World War II period, significant change in the character of the community occurred at an accelerated pace. In 1945, the National Jewish Welfare Board engaged Professor Oscar Janowsky of the City College of New York to survey the program of the National Jewish Welfare Board and its affiliates. In his introduction to the report, Professor Salo Baron wrote of "an underlying historic evolution." As a result of the great European tragedy, he observed,

> [the American Jewish Community] has seen the mantle of world Jewish leadership thrust upon its shoulder....American Jewry and its leadership have become keenly aware of that new responsibility. There are incontestable signs not only of a cultural awakening, but of a certain eagerness of the Jewish public to pioneer in the unexplored realms of a modern culture which would be both American and Jewish (Janowsky, 1948, p. xiii).

Once again, the response of the communal leadership and especially of the Jewish social work profession did not fulfill the expectation of the historian educator.

The Janowsky report recommended that "the program of the Jewish Center should devote primary attention to Jewish content" (Janowsky, 1948, p. 7). The report stated further that "the Jewish purpose and the Jewish content of its program alone invest the Jewish Center with dignity and validity and justify its existence. Only when this primary purpose has been established are neutral activities for the full development of individuality proper" (Janowsky, 1948, p. 7). The survey was extremely controversial, and its recommendations were not accepted. "After year-long study by local agencies and an appraisal by an outside committee, which disagreed with the findings of the original survey, a final statement of principles was adopted which was a compromise between differing views as to the importance of general and specifically Jewish objectives of Jewish agencies engaged in programs of leisure time activities" (*AJYB*, 1948–49, p. 132). Professionals in the Jewish field resisted recommendations for "Jewish" programming. And no one asked where professionals who were more knowledgeable and more committed to particularistic Jewish concerns might be found should their services be desired. In fact, some prominent professionals were suggesting precisely the opposite strategy. In the late 1950s, Joseph Willen, executive vice president of the New York federation, proposed a planned departure from "sectarian policies": "The implication [of his approach] is that Jews should continue to contribute through Jewish channels but should not seek Jewish content in their philanthropic agencies" (quoted in Urbont).

In the following years, the question of Jewish content was addressed in numerous articles and papers reflecting the ongoing ambivalence of the professional community. In a 1962 paper, Harold Silver, director of the Jewish Family and Children's Service of Detroit, reviewed the perennial debates concerning "What is Jewish about Jewish social work?" and presented the view that Jewish agencies were justified only where non-sectarian agencies failed to meet community needs. The idea that special qualifications and training were necessary for the Jewish communal workers was not widely accepted in the field.

Even Yeshiva University's Wurzweiler School of Social Work, where Jewish identification was ineradicable, could not escape this ambivalence. The first issue of *The Jewish Social Work Forum* published in 1963 by the alumni association of the school was devoted to a symposium on "The Jewish Social Workers' Primary Commitment: To the Social Work Profession or to the Jewish Community?" In a subsequent issue Carl Urbont, director of the 92nd Street YMHA, noted that "a category of our colleagues in Jewish agencies have commitments to social work without prior commitment to Jewish communal life." He describes the "fear of imposing the worker's values upon the client" and the frequent assumption that dedication to Jewish goals implies disloyalty to the broader striving for unity of American society or of humanity at large (Urbont, DATE?, p. 14).

In 1966, Bernard Postal, director of public information of the National Jewish Welfare Board, conducted a survey of programs offered by Jewish Centers and concluded, "If one had to appraise the Jewishness of many Centers only by the content and emphasis of their published annual reports, membership brochures, activity folders, and newspapers, he would get the uncomfortable feeling that the Center differs little from a non-sectarian recreation agency" (p. 283). Such was the assessment nineteen years after the publication of the Janowsky report.

The Jewishness of communal agencies was directly addressed by Arnulf Pins, then Associate Director of the Council on Social Work Education, in a 1963 paper entitled, "What Kind of Jewish Communal Worker Do We Need?" Pins concluded, "Unless Jewish agencies have a clear Jewish purpose which is reflected in their program, they really have no reason or rationale for continuing to exist as Jewish agencies and for being supported exclusively by Jewish funds." Pins asserts that "there is no longer the open challenge to the need and validity for a Jewish communal agenda serving Jewish needs as there was formerly." However, he adds, "It would be a mistake to assume that silence equals acquiescence or to confuse acquiescence with conviction." Pins summarized by saying,

> We need Jewish communal workers who know and care about Jewish life and the Jewish community and who possess professional competence to provide help and leadership to American Jews to preserve and enhance it.... *We need individuals who are and see themselves as Jewish communal workers with adequate Jewish and professional knowledge, attitude, and skills and not merely professional workers employed by and in a Jewish agency* (italics in original)....If we really desire Jewish group survival, then we must begin to improve our practice and develop needed training and recruitment programs.

Pins had no concrete suggestions, but he did note positively the establishment of the Yeshiva University School of Social Work and the Lown Institute (sic) for Contemporary Jewish Studies at Brandeis.

Despite Pins' strong advocacy, support for sectarianism in the field remained ambivalent at best. When I arrived at Brandeis in 1966 to inaugurate the Lown Graduate Center for Contemporary Jewish Studies, I was greeted with virtually unanimous hostility. The Center aspired to provide academic training for men and women who would enter the field of Jewish communal service. The commitment grew out of the conviction that the Jewish community was sorely in need of professional leadership who combined intellectual insights with technical skills, who possessed not only an understanding of group dynamics and management technique but who also combined an awareness of the problems of contemporary Jewish life with a commitment to Jewish survival.

In one regard, Brandeis University seemed to be the ideal location for this venture. Brandeis was a secular institution and therefore removed from the ideological and institutional factionalism of the Jewish community. The university, established and sustained with the support of American Jewry,

could be expected to undertake an endeavor that would strengthen the community that had created it. However, Brandeis was a liberal arts college, and therefore within the university there was widespread opposition because of the professional character of the program. The Florence Heller School, which was limited to doctoral studies and to social welfare, was not interested in participating in training practitioners for the Jewish field. The faculty of the Judaic studies department was hostile to a program seen as not sufficiently scholarly. When I joined the faculty of Brandeis in 1966 to direct the Lown Center, my reception from the university community ranged from tepid to cold.

At the same time, professionals in the social work field also withheld their support. Most were unabashedly hostile. They feared a watering down of professional standards and pointed out that Brandeis did not have a school of social work or education. For them the masters degree in social work remained the essential requirement for practice in the field, and the Jewish component remained a low priority. An MSW who was Jewishly illiterate was acceptable, but a Jewishly educated and sensitive worker who was viewed as deficient in professional skills was not.

How could a program be established that was professionally sound and acceptable to all of the relevant constituencies? There was little prospect of finding and recruiting a faculty member with academic credentials acceptable to the university community and with social work experience acceptable to the field of practice. And if one found such a paragon, would he or she be willing to give up a secure position and risk a career on such an untested, precarious, and controversial program?

Fortunately for the future of the program and of the American Jewish community, Bernard Reisman had arrived on the campus of Brandeis University in 1967 to pursue graduate study at the Florence Heller school. Reisman had been director of two Jewish Community Centers in the Chicago area. He was a successful professional and the father of four young children. He was also an ambitious risk-taker who enjoyed the unstinting support of a capable partner-wife, Elaine. At the age of forty, he left his secure and comfortable job, uprooted his family, and came to study at the Heller School on a Meuhlstein Fellowship awarded by the Jewish Welfare Board. While the fellowship was generous by student standards, it involved a great hardship for a family of six and stipulated that the recipient would return to work for a national Jewish agency.

At the end of the year 1967—the year of the Six-Day War in Israel that traumatized and energized the American Jewish community and the beginning of the Jewish awakening that Salo Baron had predicted in 1947—Reisman came into my office to inquire about the Lown program and to ask if he could be of assistance. I doubt that he knew what a dangerous question that was and how the answer would change his life. I had brought Joe Lukinsky to the Lown Center to inaugurate the training program for Jewish educators. Shortly afterward, Marshal Sklare was recruited to oversee a program of research in contemporary Jewish life. Could this "graduate student" be a candidate to launch the program of training for Jewish communal workers? The answer was not long in coming.

Reisman went to work (initially in a part-time capacity) with astonishing skill and enthusiasm. Initiative was his preeminent characteristic. He persuaded a variety of local agencies to provide fieldwork placements for our students—not an easy task since the program was unknown and untested. He organized practical training in and out of the classroom to supplement the academic offerings of the Center. He began at once to create a community of learning and experience in which the interaction of students and faculty became a model for their later professional work and personal growth. An integrated curriculum was developed in which all components were coordinated and professional skills were taught in the context of the Jewish communal experience. A mandatory semi-

nar in Israel between the first and second year was instituted in conjunction with the Center for Jewish Education in the Diaspora at the Hebrew University. It represented our conviction that no Jewish communal worker was adequately prepared for future responsibilities if he or she did not possess an intimate acquaintance with Israeli society and an understanding of the dynamics and problems of Israel-Diaspora relations.

In 1970, Reisman received his Ph.D. from the Heller School at Brandeis. His dissertation dealt with leadership styles and how the leader determines the culture of an organization. He examined the values and character of Jewish professionals and applied the insights gained to his work in the Lown Center. He was shaping a program in which students learned by experience and example, as well as by precept. Bernie was ready to accept a full-time university appointment and to be released from the obligation of serving a national Jewish agency. At this point, Reisman and I decided that it was time to seek a *hechsher* (seal of approval) from the leaders of the communal field. We arranged an appointment with the "Big Three": Philip Bernstein of the Council of Jewish Welfare Funds and Federations, Sanford Solender of the National Jewish Welfare Board, and Arnulf Pins of the Council on Social Work Education. On a cold and dreary winter day (the train was canceled and we were forced to drive in my tiny, tinny Chevette), we arrived in New York to make our plea. The response was as cold as the weather: no MSW, no approval of the program. Even Pins apparently acquiesced in this conclusion. One of the participants warned that we would be doing a grave injustice to our students because we were "trapping them" in the Jewish field and thus severely limiting their professional opportunities.

As we left the office, Reisman asked "What now?" The first part of my answer is unprintable in a family publication, but the conclusion was that we should proceed with our work. We were discouraged but not deterred. In 1969, Benjamin Hornstein, who had been chairman of the Board of Overseers of the Lown Graduate Center, became the enabling benefactor, and the Benjamin Hornstein Program in Jewish Communal Service was named.

For a brief time, Leonard Fein served as director of what was now called the Hornstein Program, but he soon left to found *Moment* magazine. Bernard Reisman, who had been director in all but name, assumed the post, and we were able to persuade the sponsors of the fellowship that had brought him to Brandeis that this position was sufficiently important to fulfill the requirement that he serve the national Jewish community.

New staff members were recruited: Mildred Gubermen to supervise expanding field work placement opportunities and Jonathan Woocher to teach in the area of contemporary Jewish life. New dimensions were added to the experience of students. Reisman was always in search of new ways to enrich the exposure of students to the varied dimensions of Jewish life. He instituted an annual field trip that brought students to New York for an encounter with the panoply of national Jewish agencies. Students were encouraged to attend meetings of the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds to see and be seen. The objective was to socialize students to the culture of the Jewish community and to deepen not only their understanding but also their commitment. A weekly seminar was instituted that brought lay and professional leaders of diverse commitments and experience to the campus.

As if his teaching and his work at Hornstein were not enough, Reisman also served during these years as secretary of the newly established Association of Jewish Studies and as a senior consultant to the Institute for Jewish Life where he supervised the development of programs in the area of family life. It was his research and encouragement in this capacity that helped stimulate the development of the *havurah* movement in the early 1970s.

In 1975, with a grant from the family of Sumner Milender, Reisman inaugurated a

seminar that would bring leading Jewish communal professionals to the campus to share insights and experiences with students. The first leader to be invited was an erstwhile skeptic, Sanford Solender, whose participation signaled the growing acceptance and maturation of the program. Thereafter all of the most prominent leaders of the community were honored as Milender Fellows. It is safe to say that they not only taught our students but they also learned from them.

The program was continually refined and intensified in response to the changing needs of the Jewish community. Recognition of the importance of their Jewish background and commitment among communal leaders stimulated acceptance of the Hornstein graduates. Hornstein students without exception found placements in a wide variety of settings—from federations to Hillel Foundations to Jewish Community Centers, even to family service agencies—and made their mark on the Jewish community.

Soon the program was attracting students from around the world. Reisman's diligent efforts to establish contacts and his outreach to Jewish communities around the world brought students from Europe, Israel, South America, South Africa, and Australia to the Brandeis campus. The integration of Jewish knowledge and professional skill in one program—which is unique to the Hornstein program—and the broad scope of Jewish concern gave the program a global reach and nourished a sense of the diversity of contemporary Jewish life.

New dimensions were continually developed as Reisman sought to serve the needs of the community, as well as to enrich the experience of students: continuing education seminars for professionals in the field, an annual "distinguished leaders" seminar for lay leaders from around the country, and an annual institute examining key issues on the communal agenda. In 1989, the Nathan Perlmutter Institute for Jewish Advocacy was established. More recently the Max Fisher-Irving Bernstein Institute for Leadership Development in Jewish Philanthropy was inaugurated. An active alumni association maintains a sense of fellowship with the program and provides an ongoing forum for engaging issues in the community.

In addition, the Education program, which had been a component of the original Lown Graduate Center, was revived and expanded. The Hornstein program remains flexible and responsive to the needs of its students and of the larger community.

At the turn of the millennium, a transformed Jewish community faces a radically new set of problems and challenges. Jewish continuity has replaced overseas relief and rescue and domestic defense and integration as the primary concern. More than 450 graduates of the Hornstein Program and its faculty, and the scores of participants in its seminars and institutes are among the leaders in fashioning responses to the ongoing dilemmas and opportunities.

When I came to Brandeis in 1966 to direct a modest program to train a Jewish "civil service," which had been funded by Philip W. Lown, the prospects for success were precarious. Many individuals over the ensuing decades contributed to the development of the program. But the single key individual responsible for its scope and success has been Bernard Reisman, who recognized its potential and brought it to fruition. The full harvest of his work will be reaped in the years ahead in the work of his students and disciples, in the ongoing contribution of the institute he shaped, and in the model he provided for the field of Jewish communal service.

Without his leadership, the Hornstein Program might not have succeeded at all. It certainly would not have achieved the degree of success that it has. As he reaches the age of retirement (from his job not from his calling), the work of his hands, his mind, and his spirit brings honor to him and benefit to us all.

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