

## Commitment, Ideology and Skill

Charles Miller

Consultant on Community Services, the Council of Jewish Federations, New York

*The integration of ideological and ethnic objectives requires a very special kind of clarity about their respective roles. Commitment to Jewish life and survival is basic to the directions in which we must move, but to set a direction is only the beginning of the job, and in a sense the easiest. What we need more than ever is the creative use of skill.*

Writing this paper was motivated by a number of recent developments in Jewish communal service associated with the concept of "commitment." There is concern that the long overdue return to an ideological stance may carry with it some negative implications for professional practice. It is therefore felt necessary to clarify concepts in a way which will make it possible for ideology and commitment to strengthen and enrich practice, and to avoid unnecessary tension in the future.

I call particular attention to the fact that I use the terms "commitment" and "ideology" interchangeably. I see commitment as a basic attitude which derives from ideological considerations. Therefore it is quite different in its nature and purposes from the professional attitude which is generally understood to be non-ideological and which has often been considered to be incompatible with ideology.

To begin with, I stress a deep conviction that sound commitment and ideology are absolutely essential to the healthy development of Jewish communal service, but I also feel that such conviction should not blind us to the dangers and pitfalls.

Be that as it may be, there is a new spirit abroad in the land of Jewish communal service, which accepts the Judaic heritage as a natural element in communal workers' being as people, as Americans, as Jews and as professionals. They differ in the ways in which they feel and express their Jewish identity, religiously, culturally, secularly, but it doesn't matter. The important development is that they are now giving serious

attention to the ways in which their ethnic background affects their current and future professional objectives and practices.

At the same time, it is important that we be aware of some dangers associated with the introduction of ideology into the universe of professional discourse. We see some indications that trouble may be in the making, particularly in the ways in which some are projecting the significance and uses of commitment. I refer particularly to a paper by Professor Leonard Fein on "Translating Jewish Commitment Into Practice."<sup>1</sup> It was a clear and forceful statement of the ideological approach to Jewish communal service. It was suffused with deep positive feeling about Jewish life, religion, culture and peoplehood. It recognized that Jewish life in this country is in a state of crisis, and assigned to Jewish communal service the responsibility for revitalizing American Judaism. The distinction between Jewish religion and secularism was seen as artificial and would diminish to the extent that Jewish communal workers enhanced their ways of Jewish living and sense of Jewish identity. Fein asserted that communal workers must also publicly affirm their Jewishness in order to become role models, that there must be a vast reorganization of Jewish communal service, geared to providing Jews with positive experiences in Jewish living. Jewish communal services were seen to have failed Judaically, and Jewish communal workers would be able to revitalize

<sup>1</sup> This *Journal*, Vol. LII, No. 1 (Sept. 1975), pp. 10-16.

MILLER

Judaism only as they become more literate Judaically.

Dr. Fein's thinking seems to have had real impact. A number of leading people in the field have suggested that a major way to improve the quality of Jewish life is for Jewish professionals to undertake intensive courses of Jewish study so that they can become role models for lay leaders. It is not the suggestion for study that troubles me. It is the concept of the respective roles of professional and lay leaders that is new, particularly in the suggestion that more Jewish knowledge will give us sufficient stature for lay leaders to accept us as role models.

This is a reversal of our traditional concept of the lay-professional relationship. We have always assumed that we earn our respect and our salaries based upon professional competence and contribution. It is now suggested that we earn that respect based upon the extent of our Jewish knowledge and ways of living. There is also the implication that possession of Jewish knowledge makes us superior beings, since to be a role model is to be something to be lived up to. All of which stems from the basic assumption that commitment is the primary dimension of our professional equipment.

The possibilities of tension, and even conflict, between ideological and professional considerations should not be minimized. We live at a time when Federations and agencies have to deal with many problems involving value judgments which in turn depend upon considerations which are essentially ideological. Among these are: What is the role of voluntary sectarian agencies in a society where growing public responsibility for health and welfare is necessary and inevitable? What should be the relative priorities of Federation sponsored social services which focus on sectarian and ethnic needs, as against services which relate to the general community? What should be the relative priorities of the needs of Israel as against those in this

country? More specific examples are opening the community center for certain activities on the Sabbath; community vs. congregational schools; Jewish components in individual service agencies; whether the community should provide kosher restaurants and *mikvahs*; sponsorship of non-congregational types of religious services, relationship with synagogues, etc.

### The Dangers of Ideology

In the possible dangers of the impact of commitment and ideology, it seems to me there are two major areas to be considered; a general one pertaining to the relationship of all professions to ideology, and a group of specific ones more directly relevant to Jewish communal service.

It has been a cardinal principle of all professional activity that objectivity, based on scientific principles where relevant, must be the basis of professional activity. This has certainly been the rule in such helping professions as teaching, law, the health professions and social work. Furthermore, as every major social critic of the 20th century has pointed out, in modern technological society, dominated by the influence of the physical sciences, technique and ideology have become mutually exclusive. This trend is so deep-seated that many of us become uncomfortable when ideological considerations are pressed upon us. We are now challenged to take on attitudes which have been considered anti-theoretical, and to transform them into attitudes which are complementary and mutually enforcing. This is an extremely difficult, complex and sensitive problem. On the one hand, the professional outlook is one that implies limits, valid methods and techniques, objectivity, insight into one's own motivations and accountability to professional standards. On the other hand, ideology is a vast area of belief pervaded by feeling. It implies bias and absence of objectivity, and imposes no limits or self discipline. In fact, its very

nature often impels it to extremes in thinking and behavior.

There are a number of specific signs in our profession which point to the dangers of ideology. One of these lies within the field of professional social work education.

We have all seen what has happened in recent years, in the general field of social work as schools and faculties wrapped themselves in the new mantle of righteousness, composed of affirmative action, the battle against racism, and the field of social action. Forms of discrimination against certain groups of faculty and students became fashionable. Basic traditional values of the profession have been and are being violated in the incursions on the rights of white ethnic groups, and in the disparagement of the fields of voluntary and sectarian services. Reverse discrimination became rampant. There is even a trend toward deprofessionalization which some believe is basically an ideological rather than a professional movement.

A second source of danger within our field lies in the continuing ideological attacks upon agencies and services from within the Jewish community. We are all familiar with the negative attitudes on the part of some positivists in Jewish life who are primarily concerned with Jewish religion, education and culture. The most serious aspect of this negativism is in the extreme position which holds that agencies which are not directly in the major business of religion, education or Jewish-identity building should be reduced or eliminated and their funding transferred to those agencies which are in that business. The fact that this demand is not always openly expressed does not lessen the reality of its existence.

A third trend is one which presents itself as professional but which is in fact ideological. It is the suggestion being made by responsible and well-intentioned people that we no longer need only social workers to run Federations and agencies and to

render community services of all types. I happen to agree with this view, but I have been troubled by the underlying attitudes of the people who state it. They are almost always individuals of very deep Jewish commitment with strong ideological leanings. They tend to feel that Jewish background and commitment are primary in the professional's qualifications, and by implication that skill is secondary.<sup>2</sup> They express a lack of awareness of the complexity of the human and relationship problems which are at the heart of our processes, and which require fundamental attitudes of tolerance and acceptance of all views, as well as the many sensitive, subtle and complex skills for appropriate methodology. The people I refer to are not hostile to professional social work but they do not hesitate to assert that certain professional jobs, particularly in the area of policy making, can be adequately handled by people trained as rabbis, educators, management personnel and leaders in Jewish organizational life, regardless of essential elements of attitude, personality and skill. What comes through is the primary belief that commitment conquers all.

Perhaps the most disturbing trend of all is what I see among some young people just entering the field. On the whole, they give one a sense of hope and confidence. They are intelligent, sensitive, often well trained and have a deep sense of commitment to the totality of Jewish life. They have that sense of mission and purpose which is so urgently needed in this field, but some of them are also exhibiting more troubling attitudes. A stance of moral superiority is occasionally evident. In some instances, references to fields of service, agencies and colleagues with lesser commitment emerge

<sup>2</sup> See particularly, William Cutter, "Thoughts on Jewish Professional Training," this *Journal*, Vol. LII, No. 4 (June 1976), pp. 331-43. Professor Cutter's basic position is that Jewish studies should be the major element in graduate professional training, even if at the expense of technical knowledge.

with barely concealed expressions of contempt, and in blanket judgments flowing from preconceived notions rather than from knowledge and experience. In these people, there is little or no sense of humility about the presence of a challenge and how to meet it. Discussion reveals that they have given little thought about how the situation they deplore should be dealt with. There is no indication they recognize that they are the generation that is expected to do something constructive about the problem. One has the impression that if this habit of thinking continues, the ideologue will soon crowd out the professional.

#### The Relationship of Commitment and Skill

"Commitment" is rapidly becoming a catchword in Jewish communal service. It is taking on the character of a slogan, and like many slogans it tends to oversimplify, to avoid complexities, and to shed heat rather than light. It is used increasingly as though it is some kind of superior professional dimension. It is therefore important that we be very clear about what commitment means and what its role is or should be in Jewish communal service.

It seems to me that we have to think of "commitment" not as a term of praise or blame, but as a professional quality which enhances our professional undertaking and functioning. None of us possesses all the possible professional dimensions, case-work, groupwork, community organization, administration, etc., but we continue to function with various degrees of adequacy in relation to the services we are employed to render. It has to be kept in mind that professional knowledge and skill have been and can be effective without Jewish commitment, but Jewish commitment without professional skill renders us ineffective. It therefore behooves us to use the term "commitment" in a professional rather than pejorative sense.

Jewish commitment is a composite of

knowledge, feelings and attitudes which express a basic view about Jewish life. This composite view is that Jewish life and institutions are, for the most part, worth preserving, that they are being threatened by major social forces, and that Jewish communal service should function as a counterforce to strengthen and enrich Jewish life in meaningful ways.

Such an attitude is crucial to the way we function in goal setting, in how we help Federations and agencies determine basic objectives, and in broad policy areas such as the relationship to government, to professional education and to other sectors of social welfare.

I cite a typical example: Recently, a United Way decided that day care was one of the areas of service which is now an appropriate responsibility of government and decided to reduce gradually, and ultimately withdraw from, support of day-care services. It suggested that since the local Federation supported a large day care agency and received United Way funds for this purpose, it should also adopt this policy.

Historically, Federations and their agencies have generally moved with the times as public support increased. For example, financial assistance is no longer a significant Jewish social service and fiscal support of health services has sharply declined. Day care is recognized as a major public responsibility and I suspect that in some communities the Federations would have gone along with such a request from United Way. However, in this community the United Way request was rejected. The Federation, guided by its professionals, took a clear position that day care in the Jewish community was a sectarian service, expressing basic Jewish values of concern for Jewish families and children, and was therefore an important instrument for strengthening Jewish identity. Such a view emerged because the professionals were deeply committed Jews with a clear sense

of the sectarian role of certain services. Their views influenced major policy decision affecting the existence of a Jewish agency and its continuance as an instrument for strengthening Jewish life.

However, in this situation the professionals also found that the easiest part of the job was the possession of the viewpoint. The more difficult problem was how to convince the lay leadership of the agency and Federation that they should disagree with United Way. Most of that leadership were very active in United Way, and had worked hard for many years to attain leadership positions in that organization, so as to help insure a very substantial allocation for Federation. Some of them urged immediate acceptance of the United Way position. A small minority agreed with the professional view. The majority was confused and ambivalent.

To make a long story short, the professionals utilized a wide range of skills involving a sensitive understanding of people, group dynamics, appropriate involvement of other leadership, preparation and presentation of materials, the use of themselves in special ways, a skilled identification of implications and consequences, bringing to bear other community experiences, and so on. At the same time, they were committed to the professional principle that this was truly a community decision that the community had to arrive at in a process of free and open discussion. They had to take on a leadership role which at the same time fully respected the right of the community to make its own decision, and to insure that they did not permit their viewpoint to inhibit an open process. This required great insight into their own motivations, consciousness of their role as professionals, and most of all, the disciplined use of themselves.

The professional position was opposed to the view originally held by the majority of the joint committee. It was a delicate and difficult situation, requiring great skill,

integrity and conviction, faith in the power of process and in their ability to communicate the importance of which was at stake. In other words, while commitment was a key element in the determination of the objective, it was skill which insured the outcome.

It would seem superfluous to have to stress the importance of skill to professional readers and, yet, it has to be stressed in view of the problem under consideration. It is a dramatic fact that the current viability and status of our Federations and agencies had been achieved primarily by skill and with a minimum of ideology. Our commitment has been to the highest possible quality of service and for this we should be grateful, since it has brought us to the point where we can look to the future from a base of a viable service system which has to be moved to a new level of accomplishment in relation to changing objectives. Any trend which minimizes the importance of skilled service threatens the future viability of that system.

I think there is a tendency to overlook the fact that the newer stance of commitment and ideology, with its basic concern for identity and survival, is creating a greater challenge to skill than ever before. We are being overwhelmed with a tremendous amount of diagnosis as to the nature and scope of the problem, accompanied by exhortation to do something about it, but with very few usable ideas about what to do. There is an awareness that we are dealing with a problem which is an expression of a deep cultural malaise, resulting from pervasive and powerful social forces which are having an impact on all technological cultures and which have special implications for Jews. We haven't even begun to define "Jewish identity" in professionally understandable terms, nor have we clarified the specific mission of agencies in relation to it. The problem isn't even one of content, since we know dozens of content areas we can use—Israel, Holocaust, Soviet

Jewry, cultural programming, etc. The problem is *how* to reach those who should be reached, *how* to involve them in meaningful Jewish experiences which will be internalized and effect positive feelings of Jewishness, and *how* to help them find some meaningful patterns of Jewish living. Never have we faced a tougher challenge to professional know-how. Never have we had to reach out to people who are so unrelated to Jewish life, and so indifferent to, alienated from or ambivalent about their Jewishness. Nor are we helped by those who are quick to offer simplistic solutions that completely ignore what and where people are in relation to Jewish identity. There is often professional eagerness to deal with the problem, but we do not yet know how to involve people who do not even feel that they need our help.

The entire question of the relationship of commitment and ideology to professional method and skill involves very basic questions of objectives and functions. Unfortunately, instead of focusing on these basics, there has been a tendency to focus on Jewish components in services. A review of the history of that trend will demonstrate that it has been unproductive and remains unsettled. While it is not within the purview of this paper to deal with that problem, Charles Zibbell does, in an article in *Jewish Communal Service*.<sup>3</sup> Zibbell ably points out that the Jewish community and its agencies have achieved and maintained their viability because they were closely related to the needs of Jewish people, to the sociological and cultural conditions and changes in American life, to the wishes of the contributors and decision makers in Jewish communities and to many other forces which have constituted the reality base of American Jewish communal life. That reality was sociological and cultural rather than ideological and Zibbell properly warns that any departure from that basic

<sup>3</sup> This *Journal*, Vol. LV, No. 1 (Winter, 1978), pp. 141-147.

reality threatens the viability of our communities and agencies.

Approaches stemming from ideology and not rooted in the living realities of Jewish people and communities are doomed to failure. Jewish agencies have not failed Judaically because they have never had a Judaic mission as defined by Dr. Fein and others. It is counter-productive to challenge the validity of services measured by irrelevant criteria. Some services are in the direct business of Jewish identity building and some are not. Those which are must be strengthened. Others which continue to be relevant to Jewish communal traditions and values, such as services to the elderly, must also be maintained. It is *not* a question of either or, and it is time we faced up to the crucial fact that we need new approaches, new emphases, a different sense of priorities, revised methodologies and different concepts of financing. If these new emphases ultimately result in the diminution of certain areas of activity, so be it. But that outcome must depend upon experience, and not upon the artificial injection of ideologies.

### Conclusion

Before developing the final draft of this paper, I asked a young colleague to read it. I knew her as a mature representative of the young people who had recently graduated from a school of social work, who was religiously observant, deeply committed to Jewish life and survival, and who had an excellent understanding of the professional role and of the relationship of ideology to skill. She expressed her views as follows:

She felt that the paper was relevant and timely, and that the problem described was a real one. She too has been disturbed by the attitudes of a number of her fellow students and colleagues, whose feelings of deep commitment had stimulated their desires to enter the field of Jewish communal service. They tended to see their role as a crusading one, in which they would try

to change institutional roles, policies and priorities. Based on her personal experience, she estimated that it takes about five years for these crusading attitudes to be tempered by experience, for the development of deeper insight into the respective roles of professionals and laymen, and for a sounder appreciation of the importance of skill. She therefore concluded that my views were too sharp a reaction to a group of young people, and that time would lessen the dangers of tension and conflict between ideology and skill.

My own experience suggests that the problem is of wider scope than she believes. It seems to me to be the better part of wisdom that we, as a professional group deeply concerned with the survival of meaningful Jewish life and community, come to grips with the problem before it begins to hamper the achievement of our objectives.

There are those who will be quick to say that any questions raised in this paper about commitment and ideology is really an attack on these dimensions. They will insist that there is no real or potential conflict, and that it's all a straw man issue. To them I can only say that experience does not support that viewpoint. On the other hand, there *are* professionals in Jewish communal service who are excellent tech-

nicians, but who are ideologically neutral. They are not opposed to ideology, but simply do not understand its relevance to their professional practice. And they too will be right, because there *are* many areas of professional practice in which ideological components are not necessarily relevant. All of which illustrates that if we are to move ahead to higher and richer levels of professional functioning, our attitudes must be those of tolerance, a desire for mutual understanding, objectivity, and a readiness to communicate in a mutually helpful way—in a word, professionally. Above all, that means no tampering with valid professional objectives, functions and services which have established their right to exist as essential human services. That right has been granted by the communities which created them and wish to continue to support them.

The problems we face as a professional and ethnic group are serious. The integration of ideological and ethnic objectives requires a very special kind of clarity about their respective roles. Commitment to Jewish life and survival is basic to the directions in which we must move, but to set a direction is only the beginning of the job, and in a sense the easiest. What we need more than ever is the creative use of skill.

## Building Bridges: Towards Realistic Links Between Research and Planning in Jewish Communal Life\*

Steven Huberman, Ph.D.

Planning Associate, Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston

... much is necessary to improve Jewish communal programming. With all its failings, "action research" has the potential to bring greater rationality to Jewish social planning.

Three-quarters of the Jewish children of school age in New York City receive no religious instruction. The quarter given some training hardly fares better. Incompetent teachers, shabby quarters, and a sterile approach to education combine to estrange many of the young. Of the approximately 51,954 children who receive instruction, 27 percent (13,952) supplement their public school session in 468 small, improvised, private schools, the ignominious *hadarim*. These schools are run by one, two, or three men who wish only to eke out a livelihood which they fail to obtain by other means. Classes meet in the basement or upper floor of some old dilapidated building where rent is minimal. The provisional classrooms are usually filthy, the light dim, the air stuffy, and the learning minimal.<sup>1</sup>

These were the conclusions of Dr. Mordecai Kaplan's 1909 epic study on New York Jewish education. This 1909 investigation was important for two reasons: it conclusively demonstrated that Jewish education was characterized by public apathy and educational ineptitude and second, the study was the first of its kind. It was one of the first systematic attempts to diagnose scientifically a Jewish communal problem. Prior to Kaplan's research, conducted under the aegis of the New York Kehilla, Jewish educational problems were the province of a handful of philanthropists. Subsequent to the study, religious educa-

tion became central to the Jewish communal agenda. From 1909-1911 the New York Kehilla went on to develop model schools, textbooks, teacher-training programs, and curricula. In each of these endeavors, Samson Benderly, Judah Magnes, Mordecai Kaplan, and the other Kehilla zealots relied on an article of faith—research was the necessary step in solving a social problem.<sup>2</sup>

Although the Jewish polity has become more variegated since 1909, scientific research is not as prominent in planning as in the days of the Kehilla. In this paper we shall explore the current and potential relationship between research and Jewish social planning. In particular, we will analyze the action research design; the functions of Jewish action research; programmatic constraints; and the future of research conducted in turbulent settings.

### Action Research

Kurt Lewin developed a style of research which is applicable to Jewish communal planning. As Director of the Research Center for Group Dynamics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Lewin tested various models to improve inter-group relations. Out of these experiments came cooperative links between practitioners and social scientists. The hallmark of Lewin's approach was "action research." He describes the approach in *Resolving*

\* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Denver, Colorado, May 25, 1980.

<sup>1</sup> Arthur A. Goren, *New York Jews and the Quest for Community: The Kehilla Experiment, 1908-1922*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1970, pp. 88-89.

<sup>2</sup> Jewish education as a communal responsibility is discussed in Goren, *ibid*, pp. 86-109. The role of the Bureau of Philanthropic Research in social reform is examined on p. 70.