

Rediscovering the Soul in Jewish Communal Practice* (Comment on Preceding Article, "Translating Jewish Commitment into Practice")

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DR. FEIN has cogently and beautifully defined the goal for our entire Conference: "to translate intentions into meanings and meanings into behavior . . . to find ways of working with each Jew as a unit and all Jews as a unity". Today most communal workers would agree that Jewishness can no longer be considered an "irrelevant coincidence" of our work but rather furnishes a central resource which we must "maximize" in meeting individual and communal needs. We can draw satisfaction with Dr. Fein that joining in this common task serves to break down the divisiveness which often existed between the "secular" communal worker and the "Jewish" teacher and leader. We all now must share the goal of making Jewish living more meaningful for the individual and the family.

Beyond that, we too hope with Dr. Fein to bring into Jewish life the sense of "Judaic success" which involves both an intensification of the individual's pleasure in affirming his Jewishness as well as a success at infusing its richness into every aspect of his present existence. The Commission on Structure, Function and Priorities of the Conference found among Jewish communal workers a general dissatisfaction with the quality of Jewish life both as they, themselves, and their clients were experiencing it. The challenge to all of us is how to improve that quality and help the individuals, families and com-

munities whom we serve to use it more fully.

I wish I could agree with Dr. Fein that communal workers could best achieve this goal simply by the intensification and enrichment of their own Jewish identity. Certainly our behavior and pattern of life must reflect the values which we purport to be communicating. Unfortunately, through painful experience, we have learned that often the very people whom we hope to reach have as much a propensity for rejecting or denying role models as for following them. The more extremely such a model deviates from the current practices of the people we serve, the more likely that model is to be rejected. Our task consequently is to discover how we can utilize the knowledge and methods we have been developing in our respective fields to break through the pattern of denial and resistance. How can we make more inviting and meaningful to the individuals and communities we serve the quality of Jewish life about which we are talking today?

Similarly I must caution against an overemphasis on "oneness". A shared task and unified goal is not best achieved through the abandonment of established and differentiated areas of competence. At times there has been a tendency to reject one form of help as we have sought other means of accomplishing our ends. Most recently individualized forms of helping have tended to be the scapegoat. Let us not all jump on the bandwagon of education, group methods or community ac-

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tivism. We have to recognize that the factors which have led to the failures of Judaism have been both individual and social. Breaking through the Jewish inertia requires methods which can, on the one hand, overcome individual resistance and enable each person to internalize the social and universal significance of Judaism; on the other, help communities and groups to make more available the resources and opportunities through which a greater number of individuals can find a deeper and more intensive experience with Jewishness.

I do not imply that we all have to stand pat with our current methods as though they were final and complete. I am convinced as we apply our present ways of working to the tasks ahead of us, methods will change and new knowledge emerge. Certainly those workers who have practiced on an individualized basis must learn to bring more into that practice the social goals, norms and communal concerns underlying our joint purpose. To an equal degree, the practitioners dealing with communities, schools and congregations must discover the means of helping their participants internalize and translate to behavior the content of their teaching. How much we both have to learn from each other! The polarity between the individual and the social recognized so clearly by Dr. Fein and implicit in our Jewish traditions must at no time be lost. Judaism for the individual involves both his own readiness to make inner choices based on Jewish values, as well as his sense of connectedness and unity with the Jewish people. Our help must deal with both aspects of this polarity.

While I would be in full agreement with Dr. Fein that "No task (is) more urgent than reclaiming the Jewish present, of owning our own time free and clear", I would not be inclined to

be as pessimistic as is he about the "present" of Jewish communal service. Were there nothing in our "present" of Jewish significance, we could not have planned this Conference on such a theme. We have to be careful not to allow despair to wipe out the sound and constructive elements which have persisted in Jewish life. It is the presence of these elements which provide the base for working on Jewish continuity.

Most of us at this Conference, too, could not accept a conclusion that Jewish communal service, by and large, represents "a Judaic failure". I, too, have been critical at times of the failure by many communal workers to make as significant a use as might have been possible of the Judaic quality implicit in their work. Yet the present constellation of Jewish communal institutions and services represents in the best of Jewish tradition the effort to meet the ever-present needs of our people for basic subsistence, housing, work, love, nurturance, medical care and relative freedom from excessive fear, anxiety and guilt. I would not be prepared to count even our limited accomplishments in meeting those needs a "failure". I would agree with Dr. Fein that our services could be made more effective and richer if we could draw more fully on the heritage, tradition and values of Judaism in providing them.

While I do not doubt the centrality for Jewish survival and continuity of religion and the riches of commentary, ritual and practice surrounding it, I would not want to count every other expression of Judaism as a failure. "Secular" is a broad term that has sometimes been used to wipe out many rich streams in Jewish life. It is not my intention to argue for the significant contributions made by the Jewish labor movement, the "Yiddishists", culturists, "philanthropists", Labor Zionists or the many other "non-religious" though af-

firmatively Jewish trends. The fiber of Judaism, with faith at its core, is made up of many other strands. Each of these strands has added to Judaism its richness and diversity and provided to some degree the means of surviving when other strands have given. In our efforts to enrich Jewish life and to bring that enrichment deep within the self of every Jew, we must use all possible means. The very diversity of Jewish expression, in a sense, has been its strength. In times of crisis, very often some of these diverse strands have actually been the means for our survival.

I like Dr. Fein's talk of *creative* Jewish continuity. In a sense that continuity must rest on the richness of our past, its tradition and heritage. It is as we rework those elements in the present, using in that task the diversity of the realities with which Jews contemporaneously must cope, that the direction of future continuity is formed. While, as Dr. Fein points out, a messianic future has been predicted for us, we know full well that to enable our children and future generations to approach that future we will continuously have to rework our present. Change is implicit in creative continuity. No generation of Jews has been precisely like the past generation. We, ourselves, have been changed by the Holocaust, the rebirth of Israel, the terrorist massacres and the renaissance of Soviet Jewry. With Dr. Fein we must recognize that the investment of our continuity with the meaning of the events around us must be a willful act for which each of us takes continuing responsibility.

Sometimes a microcosm illuminates a universe. Several days ago I was talking to Nancy, a troubled adolescent. As we listened together to a tape of a previous family session where the family had strongly denied any religious identity, she suddenly remarked with surprise:

"I sound Jewish!" What did that mean to her? "I don't know. I know I am Jewish and don't resent it. I wish my parents had insisted I go to religious school. I would have fought it but I would know now what being Jewish means." Nancy and her family typify the challenge we face. We cannot abandon the myriads like them. Communal workers must be provided with the knowledge to meet their needs. Continuing Jewish education for staff must be given a high priority by our communal workers. We must be, again to use one of Dr. Fein's metaphors, like "door-to-door peddlers" to reach the Nancys and their families, one-by-one if necessary, as well as through group means to help each to fulfill himself as an individual and to enrich himself as a Jew. The forthcoming sessions of this Conference will be dealing with those efforts.

To a degree many of us in communal service had discarded the soul as we sought the rational and scientific means of helping individuals, families, groups and communities. We acquired vital knowledge and learned many important methods about how to individualize social purpose and to humanize social institutions, but all too often were left with barren processes. Our task now is to reclaim our soul—to make central to our practice the rich stream of Jewishness in all its diversity — to combine it with our methods towards the goal of creating a "Jewish present" for each individual Jew and family, as well as for *Klal Israel*. In doing that, we will be creating the groundwork and generating the materials out of which we can, to use Dr. Fein's words, "...construct a Jewish community of nerve and purpose, a community both more healthy and more energetic than we have thus far known..."