REVISITING THE JEWISH CONTINUITY–JEWISH COMMUNITY RELATIONS DIALECTIC

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Interviews with directors of several community relations agencies indicate that a discrepancy exists between the rhetorical commitment of the community relations field to Jewish continuity and its translation into programmatic action. Yet, over the past fifteen years, the older generation of community relations directors has been replaced by a cohort of younger, more Jewishly knowledgeable and committed professionals who are more predisposed ideologically to a continuity agenda. Gauging the impact of this new cohort of directors on community relations programming will require more extensive data collection.

Since the publication of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), much has been written about the prospects for the continuity of Jewish life in the United States in the decades to come. In the ensuing years, virtually every American Jewish communal agency and organization has clamored to define or redefine its role vis-a-vis the continuity question. At stake is much more than agency mission statements and the attendant programming. The allocation of funds by Jewish federations has been significantly affected by the imperatives (real or perceived) of continuity. So pervasive is the communal preoccupation with continuity that certain institutions seem to be convinced that a failure to address Jewish continuity will ultimately portend an end to their institutional continuity. The community relations field has not been entirely impervious to this tendency. Indeed, this sector of the Jewish communal polity, with its explicitly external focus, would seem to be subject to greater scrutiny in light of these shifting community priorities.

In this article, I explore the complex interplay between the Jewish community relations field and the larger community agenda of Jewish continuity, as it has unfolded in recent years.

BACKGROUND

To be sure, the Jewish community relations field has historically undergone a process of constant evolution and redefinition. Arnold Aronson, in 1960, characterized that evolution in six different stages. In the first, *Group Welfare,* a Jewish social welfare network developed to accommodate the large-scale Jewish immigration immediately preceding and during that period. Needless to say, the primary focus during this stage was internal. The *Defense* stage entailed the combatting of anti-Semitism with a concomitant shift to a more external posture. The next stage, *Education*, sought to impart to the American public the notion that the Jews were no different from their Gentile neighbors. Here too, the target population was external to the Jewish community, although the strategy was somewhat altered. Recognizing the need to coalesce with other like-minded communities in the fight against Nazism and world fascism, the Jewish community relations field later entered the *Intergroup Cooperation* stage. The next stage, *Social Action,* was directed more toward government in an attempt to remedy the societal ills upon which racism and intolerance fed. Aronson's evolutionary model culminates in the *Community Relations* stage, which recognized the cultural diversity of American society and affirmed the distinctive group identity of its composite parts (Aronson, 1960).

Similarly, Earl Raab, the pre-eminent community relations theorist and practitio-

ner, viewed the development of the field in three distinct periods. The first concentrated rather singularly upon the fight against anti-Semitism, domestically and abroad. The second period, following World War II, was characterized by efforts to safeguard a democratic and pluralistic America, "the bywords being civil rights and civil liberties" (Raab, 1980). The fundamental assumption underlying the activity of this period was that the security of the Jew was inextricably linked to a democratic and pluralistic society. This approach is reflected in the 1959 writings of John Slawson of the American Jewish Committee: "We need to dissolve the fears that retard full and open participation in all aspects of American life: the fear of being repulsed or bruised as an emotional eventuality, the fear of risking intermarriage as a personal consequence, the fear of group extinction as a sociological outcome" (Slawson, 1980). The third period, which emerged during the late 1960s, was dominated first by the overarching concern for the security of the State of Israel and later by advocacy on behalf of Soviet Jewry. This period, which coincided with the war in Vietnam and rampant urban strife in the United States, was accompanied by a disillusionment of sorts with American society. "As a result of these developments, the American Jewish public affairs agenda seemed to turn inwards, away from the second period preoccupation with the internal nature of the American society" (Raab, 1980). Raab foresaw that in the next stage of development there would likely be a fusion of the elements of the two previous periods, based on the recognition that the security of Jews the world over, including those in America, would increasingly depend on the nature of American society. Therefore, "the second period emphasis must be returned to its proper place on the agenda, not as a dominant theme, but neither as a marginal theme" (Raab, 1980). The ebb and flow of this evolutionary process are well capsulized by Bertram Gold of the American Jewish Committee: "In short, in this century, we have seen transitions from Jewish affirmation to Jewish self-hate to Jewish self-acceptance to Jewish reaffirmation" (Gold, 1982).

However, the seismic shift within the American Jewish community in recent years constitutes not merely the emergence of a new stage in the community relations field's development, but rather a watershed. For as Jewish scholar Deborah Lipstadt (1984) pointedly notes,

> The new generation has abandoned what has been described as the "assimilationist agenda" of the previous generation of leaders and adopted a "survivalist" one. They have focused their energies on the internal well-being of the community and have paid less attention to the relations of the American Jewish community with other sectors of the general American society. These changes have far-reaching implications for the specific qualities of Jewish life as well as for American Jewry's relationship with the State of Israel.

Clearly then, the manifestations of Jewish introspection were present before 1990. The findings of the NJPS merely served to highlight that tendency and add a dimension of urgency. It is against this backdrop that my interest in this question was piqued.

METHODOLOGY

My research was strictly of an exploratory nature. First I surveyed the professional literature, essays, speeches of recent years, and, of course, the centerpiece of the field, the Joint Program for Jewish Community Relations. In addition, semi-structured interviews with directors of Jewish community relations councils (CRCs) from seven communities were conducted. The communities included two large metropolitan centers in the Western United States (with Jewish populations of approximately 500,000 and 21,000); two large Midwestern metropolitan centers (with Jewish populations of

approximately 260,00 and 95,000); one Northeastern metropolitan center (approximately a population of 230,000); one Northeastern suburban cluster with approximately 125,000 Jews; and one smaller Midwestern city (approximately 10,000 Jews). Four of the CRCs are independent agencies, and the other three, with varying degrees of autonomy, are committees or departments of the local Jewish federation. Of the CRC directors interviewed, one had five years of experience in his or her present position, five had between six to nine years, and one reported having functioned in that capacity for close to 15 years. Finally, I drew upon my own experience as staff intern at the Jewish Community Council of Metropolitan Detroit.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

When comparing the Joint Program Plan of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC) from 1988–89 with that of 1994–95, several instructive differences emerge. The Program Plan of 1989–90 outlined the role of NJCRAC as follows:

> Jewish community relations activities are directed toward protecting and enhancing conditions conducive to the creative continuity and well-being of the Jewish community. Such conditions can be achieved only within a social framework committed to democratic pluralism;...Jewish community relations agencies give a high priority to fostering American support for Israel; aiding endangered overseas Jewish communities; combatting anti-Semitism at home and abroad; protecting democratic constraints, particularly the Bill of Rights; and fostering a plural, democratic society in the United States.

The comparable portion of the same introductory section of the 1994–95 Program Plan reads as follows:

> The entire range of Jewish community relations concerns are addressed through the NJCRAC process; from interpreting developments in Israel, to promoting equality of opportunity for all in American society; from securing support for oppressed Jews around the world, to promoting positive cooperation between America's many religious, ethnic and racial groups; from protecting the environment, to ensuring energy independence for the United States; from empowering college students to address their public affairs concerns, to engaging the broader Jewish community in efforts to assure continuity through work on the public affairs agenda.

Although the two passages seem similar, they are, in fact, fundamentally different. For, in the first, the community relations field is entrusted with the task of facilitator, i.e., making continuity possible through actions in the political/civic arena. In the second, however, the field, in and of itself *becomes an agent of continuity*. Further, the second Program Plan contains an entire preface entitled "Jewish Continuity and Public Affairs," which affirms the compatibility of continuity and community relations. It contains this passage:

> Critical to Jews playing such a role in the public affairs arena have been the organizational structures that define the field of Jewish community relations. Through these Jewish vehicles, they have acted consciously, deliberately and openly as Jews on the vital issues of American life; they have addressed them, as Heine would say, with a "Jewish accent." This is a unique contribution the field of Jewish community relations makes to Jewish continuity.

From a more local angle, the Detroit CRC recently revised its mission statement. An earlier version read in part, "The Jewish Community Council provides the leadership for the community relations activities of the metropolitan Jewish community. In carrying out its task, it speaks for that community, initiates programs, seeks opportunities for collaboration with other religious and ethnic communities..."

The current mission statement, revised in December 1994, reads, "The Jewish Community Council of Metropolitan Detroit works to safeguard the Jewish community by advancing Jewish interests, promoting Jewish values, and advocating on behalf of Jews at home and around the world. In carrying out its mission, Council establishes relationships with ethnic, racial, religious, education and civic organizations and the media."

In policy documents, these subtle distinctions represent a qualitative shift in positioning vis-a-vis continuity, and their importance must not be underestimated. Moreover, the wording of the policy literature informs and is informed by the evolving language and culture of the community relations field at large. Dr. Lawrence Rubin, executive director of NJCRAC, illustrates this phenomenon in a publication entitled "The Emerging Jewish Public-Affairs Culture": "The language of the field relies increasingly on the injunctions of the Judaic tradition to justify communal participation. More and more, one finds these activities justified by the Judaic principle of *tikkun olam* [repairing the world] or by reference to the so-called prophetic tradition, which commands Jews to care for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger at our gates, for we were strangers in the land of Egypt."

INTERVIEWS

The posture of the Jewish community relations field since 1990, as evinced by CRC directors' responses, reveals a slightly different picture. All of the respondents were asked to identify the primary spheres of programmatic activity in which their respective agencies were engaged four to five years ago. Without exception, all pointed to mobilizing on behalf of Soviet Jewry and advocacy for Israel. Intergroup relations typically ranked third, and other areas of activity included public education, church-state issues, combatting anti-Semitism and hate crimes, urban affairs, promoting AIDS awareness, and government relations.

In characterizing their primary areas of activity today, virtually all reported devoting a greater degree of time and energy to domestic issues. In many ways, this was to be expected, as during the five-year interim, the masses of Soviet Jews were and still are permitted to emigrate from the former Soviet Union and Israel, having embarked on a historic process of negotiating peace with her neighbors, is perceived as increasingly powerful and secure. The shift in programming therefore from an international Jewish emphasis to a more nonsectarian domestic one was induced largely by (global) factors, external to the agencies themselves. There were nonetheless certain other internal factors that contributed to this shift. One extreme example was the case of the Los Angeles CRC, which was forced to contend with the effects of both urban riots and an earthquake. Two CRC directors pointed to budgetary considerations ("local issues give you more money for the dollar"), and two more observed that many of the younger "up and coming" CRC activists (volunteers) in the community exhibited a greater interest in local affairs.

When asked to comment specifically on changes between the two periods in their efforts in the sphere of intergroup relations, some interesting differences emerged. One CRC director reported that, due to the changing demographic landscape of his city, a greater emphasis was being placed on relations with the Latino community. Another noted that the menu of intergroup relations had not changed significantly, but that a change had occurred in terms of the particular echelon of the group targeted. Her CRC moved from "inter-religious shmoozing with community leaders" to interfacing with "grassroots leadership on the basis of concrete projects with measurable outcomes." Four pointed to less inter-religious activity ("the heyday of ecumenism is gone") and more work, both in frequency and intensity, with racial and ethnic communities. One added that relations with the African-American community were still

high on the agenda, but assumed a more understated form. On the same subject, another added that despite attempts to reach out to emerging minorities, such as Asians and Latinos, "the African-American community was relatively easier to work with and much more accessible." It is worth noting that most CRC directors appeared to be more circumspect about "intergroup relations for its own sake." Although each recognized the importance of cultivating harmonious intergroup relations, most seemed more inclined than in the past to view those relations from the perspective of their utility for the Jewish community.

Finally, in describing the work of their agencies as it relates to the larger community agenda of continuity, some illuminating insights were offered. Needless to say, all acknowledged paying more and more attention to 'continuity.' At the same time, none reported that the work of their agency had been drastically transformed as a result. In addressing the more practical implications of continuity, however, the CRC directors responded with anything but unanimity. In two instances, special "outreach programming," intended to enlist the involvement of heretofore unaffiliated Jews, was cited. One such example was a 1992 conference entitled "Return to Passion," which was designed to bring together young civic-minded Jews under explicitly Jewish auspices in order to build (or rebuild) a bridge between the suburban community and the inner city. "'Return to Passion' essentially tested the hypothesis that there are lots of Jews out there who care, want to do something, and would respond positively to doing so under a Jewish roof," the CRC director said. In two other communities, the CRC had initiated programming directed at Jewish high-school seniors in the public schools system, which included workshops on such issues as college selection, anti-Semitism on campus, and Israel advocacy. Yet another CRC director noted that although his agency had not embarked upon any specific continuity programming, he had attempted to "weave continuity into the regular programming." An example was the introduction of a family educational component into a conference dealing with environmental issues. He further opined that continuity programming as such, if not supplemented by the more traditional means of Jewish education, would not take root. Interestingly, in two communities, the CRC, theoretically the secular, public policy arm of the Jewish community, was instrumental in establishing a community-wide, pan-denominational Board of Rabbis.

The chief proponent of continuity has been the local federations, the fund-raising and allocating arm of the community. It was the CJF, the national umbrella body of Jewish federations, that commissioned the NJPS in 1990. The relationship, then, between CRCs and the institution that provides most if not all of its funding, the local federation, would seem critical in understanding the CRC's posture vis-a-vis the continuity question. Here, responses varied somewhat. Three CRC directors reported an improved *modus vivendi* with federation, with two CRCs assuming a greater role in lobbying local and state government on behalf of federation-funded human service agencies. One reported no substantive change whatsoever over the past few years. Another suggested that present relations with his local federation had more to do with economics (decreased agency allocation due to a flat campaign overall), than with any programming per se. Still another explained that many of the officers and board members of his CRC were also involved in the governance of that community's federation, thus underscoring the positive predisposition of the latter toward the former. That same CRC director also noted that, as Israel figures so prominently in the continuity equation, the hegemony of CRC in the Israel advocacy arena affords it the opportunity of Israel-related programming that could be tailored to conform to a continuity model.

DISCUSSION

Based on my limited research, a certain discrepancy exists between the rhetorical commitment of the community relations field to continuity and its translation into programmatic action. Several theories can be offered in explaining this phenomenon. One such theory could be characterized as structural lag, suggesting that the field is either unaware of or has simply not adapted to the changes that have transpired in its surrounding environment. I would reject this rather simplistic interpretation of the findings, for, in this case, the professionals in the field are an integral part of the policy formulation process. Had they not been sensitized to the continuity agenda, it in all likelihood would not have found such prominent expression in the policy documents. It might be that the policy has been redefined to accommodate the environmental exigencies, but that the practitioners in the field are hesitant to carry out its implementation, preferring instead to test the policy waters for the time being.

Another way of understanding the perceived discrepancy is to conclude that the field has, in fact, artfully integrated the tenets of continuity into the programming arena without compromising the essential nature of its historic mandate. Perhaps the best example of this approach is the attempt of some CRCs to activate largely disaffected young Jews around issues of social justice. The empirical rationale underlying this notion can be traced to the findings of the NJPS. There, it states that Jews of all ages tend to identify themselves as an ethnic group rather than a religious community; in addition, they consistently rank social justice as a high variable of Jewish responsibility (Kosmin et al., 1991). Therefore, if the dogma of social justice can be understood as central to the religious identity of the ethnic Jew, the community relations field can be viewed, according to this same metaphor, as an eminently appropriate "house of worship." As Nancy Kaufman, Boston CRC director, proposed, in a speech at the NJCRAC annual convention in 1994, "We, as Jewish community relations councils, must be committed to Jewish literacy and then must be informed as to the variety of projects that are available throughout the organized Jewish community through which individuals can act." According to this view, the Jewish community relations field is not only compatible with continuity but it can also serve as its very custodian. This interpretation is persuasive, yet at present, its application in the field is rather limited. Those current examples in which the historic objectives of community relations are fulfilled through a vehicle consistent with the agenda of continuity perhaps represent a noteworthy trend, though today, they do not seem particularly widespread.

During the course of my interview with one of the CRC directors, I learned that approximately 15 years ago, an interesting change occurred in the Jewish community relations professional realm. Within a relatively short period, the older generation of CRC directors was replaced by a cohort of younger, more Jewishly knowledgeable and committed professionals. This group consisted of several ordained rabbis, individuals who had lived in Israel, and many more women. I was surprised to learn that, perhaps paradoxically, a fair number of these newer CRC directors had enrolled their children in Jewish day school—this despite their professional/organizational commitment to public education. Whereas their predecessors tended to highlight their close ties with the labor and civil rights movements, this cohort seems more organically linked to the organized Jewish community. This observation was further buttressed by another CRC director who noted that her own personal background, which was characterized by extensive ties with organized labor and the civil rights movement, "placed her in a distinct minority." Perhaps, unwittingly then, the issue of personnel serves to prepare the community relations field more successfully for survival and legitimacy in an era of concern for con-

tinuity. At the same time, it could be argued, perhaps with equal force, that the demographic shift in the field's personnel would more naturally precipitate a departure from the traditional programmatic focus. Indeed, a professional cohort that is more predisposed ideologically to a continuity agenda could be expected to orchestrate a programmatic shift with greater conviction and less apprehension. Either way, such propositions, at this point, are entirely speculative and would necessitate much more extensive data collection.

CONCLUSION

As stated at the outset, this study was strictly an exploratory one. Its findings are, at best, preliminary and require subsequent research. What is clear is that the community relations-continuity dialectic is far from resolved. One creative approach in grappling with this notion was articulated by Dr. Steve Windmueller, Los Angeles CRC director, at the 1994 NJCRAC convention: "The Jewish continuity debate affords the community relations field an opportunity to reassert its legitimacy. Its voice can be increasingly strengthened by the effective use of Jewish legal and historic resources. At the same time, its mission can remain focused, protecting American Jewish interests while offering critical new insights into the issues that touch the lives and destiny of this nation and its people."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I gratefully acknowledge these individuals whose assistance was invaluable—Professor John Tropman of the University of Michigan's School of Social Work who provided methodological and conceptual guidance; David Gad-Harf, executive director of Detroit's Jewish Community Council whose supervision throughout the entire year allowed for much professional and intellectual growth; and the six CRC directors who generously gave of their time and insights and thus provided the data from which the theories advanced in this paper were culled. Their efforts, if not their identities, indeed deserve recognition.

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