

## The Politics of Scarcity: Jewish Communal Service in an Era of Resource Pressure

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*There is no question that cutting back, if indeed we must, can be more difficult than growing, for any political system. We see a model in Washington today of how **not** to do this, of how to wield an ideological cleaver in such a fashion that human goals are lost sight of.*

It is appropriate to begin with some good news and some bad news. The good news is that resources for local Jewish communal services have expanded considerably over the past several decades. In Boston, to cite one example, the Federation campaign has tripled over the past twenty years, and allocations to local agencies have risen by approximately 250 percent during that same period. This growth in funding has also included a tremendous expansion in monies received from government and non-sectarian sources. With this bounty, Jewish agencies have been able to expand their staffs and their programming, both in terms of quantity and quality.

Now for the bad news: this period of growth may well be coming to an end. Although our community campaigns do continue to increase (and hopes and plans exist for dramatic increases in the next three to five years), their capacity to keep pace with the high levels of inflation is at least doubtful. Equally questionable are the prospects for any significant augmented funding from non-sectarian sources. And, looming over any discussion of resources for Jewish communal services is the new political mood apparently sweeping the nation. The full impact of the Reagan budget cuts on Jewish agencies is still unknown. But we can be almost certain that the government's new "safety net" will bounce many more Jews into the arms of our social service agencies at the very time that government funds to support these

agencies' programs are being cut back. Jewish communal agencies have no quarrel with the philosophy that calls for a greater role for voluntary organizations within society. The question is whether, given not only this general picture, but the growing demand for "Jewish" services rooted in the heightened Jewish self-consciousness and aspirations which have developed in recent years, the resources will be there to permit continued expansion.

I suspect that the answer, at least for the immediate future, is "no." What I am projecting is an era of "relative scarcity" in resources for Jewish communal services. By this I mean not an absolute diminution in institutional expenditures (our "Gross Jewish Product" as it were), but a heightening perception that the resources available do not meet the needs and may not even permit the continuation of service levels to which we have become accustomed. This is likely to be true in terms of not only financial resources, but human resources as well. As volunteers and professionals are pushed to the limit in their responsibilities, and as we confront possible shortages in the available pools from which to draw such leadership, tasks may remain undone not only because there are no funds to be found, but because there is no one to do the work as well.

I have drawn a rather gloomy scenario in order to challenge us with "worst case" possibilities. The key question, obviously, is how will the communal system respond.

Should we be spared the most dire of the eventualities we fear, we will all be relieved and grateful. But if the resource squeeze does continue and even grow worse, can we outline strategies of response which will at least mitigate the damages? I want to explore here what might be termed "damage control mechanisms" at three different levels: first, at the intra-organizational level; second, at the level of inter-organizational relationships; and third, at the total system level. Most of what I have to offer will not be new and radical, but rather a recapitulation and extension of ideas long discussed and advocated within the world of Jewish communal service. But I hope that by refocusing on some of these elements of organizational and political behavior, we may even in the coming period be able to "draw sweet from bitter"<sup>1</sup> for our communal system.

I begin with the premise that scarcity is a powerful motivator. Whether it be in an organic or an organizational setting, the sense of deprivation or possible deprivation is a spur to action. But what kind of action? The dynamics of response are varied, but we might typically see several types of activity: competition for resources, shifts in the patterns of allocation and utilization of resources within systems, efforts to develop new sources of scarce material, new linkages between units to maximize effectiveness in procuring and husbanding scarce resources. All of these are response strategies, and all promise some benefits at some levels. But all also carry potential dangers, as does perhaps the most immediately seductive strategy—hanging on to as much of the status quo as possible in the hopes that the situation will change.

In examining response strategies at each of the three levels noted above, I would like to focus on one potential danger in each instance and then suggest a possible strategy

for countering that danger. This does not imply that the danger exists only at that level, nor that it is the only potential negative to be countered. Indeed, to anticipate one conclusion of my analysis, there needs to be a congruence in response strategies on all three levels, because we are all dealing with essentially the same dilemmas and temptations.

On the organization level, i.e., within our several agencies, one of the great challenges posed by resource scarcity is the threat of what is called goal displacement, namely the substitution of organizational maintenance goals for service effectiveness goals.<sup>2</sup> That is, the organization, perceiving itself to be embattled and besieged, may begin to look upon its own survival and security as its primary *raison d'être*, rather than the delivery of the services and programs for which it is ostensibly operating. Resources will be allocated internally with institutional preservation as the primary goal, or, perhaps more likely, confusion will reign about how to order priorities when cuts in service are mandated. To the extent that this happens, there can be a distortion not only of the services and programs, but also in staff relations, in the decision-making process (how decisions are actually made—are they made cooperatively, or are they made in authoritarian fashion?) and in the entire way in which resources are used within the agency. Clearly, therefore, this type of goal displacement and organizational distortion is something that should be avoided. The question, however, is how to make decisions about priorities within organizations that will honor the need for institutional preservation without succumbing to these distortions.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Daniel J. Elazar, "Project Renewal: Drawing Sweet From Bitter," *Jerusalem Letter: Viewpoints*, No. 14, February 23, 1981.

<sup>2</sup> This discussion of goal displacement and of the prioritizing process is based on the approach of Marc L. Miringoff, *Management in Human Service Organizations* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1980), especially chapters 3 and 4.

I would suggest that four questions be posed in determining organizational service priorities. First, the agency should ask, in which areas of program or service do we possess the highest technological capabilities? What do we do best? One strategy for setting priorities is to play to strength. If we know we are most successful in a particular area, that we have the ability to translate the resource input into a programmatic or service output most efficiently and effectively in that domain, we ought to emphasize those areas of strength. Otherwise, we are likely to be wasting resources. Though we may be in a position where there are many things we would *like* to do, even many things we think *need* to be done, nevertheless, we must be honest within our own institutional setting and ask what are we really best equipped to do, and focus our efforts in those areas.

A second question that we need to pose in addition to that of technological capability is to ask which areas are most directly expressive of our basic values, what we really stand for institutionally and communally. One of the ironic casualties in a period of growth may be this sort of reexamination. A new idea comes along and we look at it; we say that it seems good and appropriate, and set out to pursue it. Often these are excellent ideas and make worthy programs. But expansion may breed fuzziness in direction and diffusion of energies. Central goals may be lost sight of in the face of attractive possibilities. Scarcity can force us to ask again what really are our cardinal institutional and larger communal values and how do we go about making sure that these are the areas that we emphasize in our program priorities.

A third question: in which areas are needs most likely to grow? We must look not only at the spectrum of demands on our resources today, but anticipate where demands are likely to be coming from in the future. If we are going to be facing a situation in which needs will be outstripping

the available resources, we ought to expend some time and energy anticipating precisely in which areas those needs are likely to outstrip resources most acutely. We can then begin today to develop the programs and services that will enable us to be prepared to respond quickly and effectively as those needs expand, without abrupt shifts, long-lag times, and excessive start-up costs.

Finally, it seems to me that it is both legitimate and necessary to raise the question: for which areas of service are we most likely to be able to generate new resources? There is a linkage between what we choose to do and the extent to which we are able to mobilize support. Thus, it is not only a prudent institutional policy, but also, in the long run, beneficial in terms of our service goals to be asking ourselves both where we can anticipate that new resources will be coming from and what types of programs will be most conducive to generating them. We would be asking in effect what kinds of programmatic investments we need to make in order to be able to reap a harvest of new resources which may enable us to fund a variety of services even outside the scope of those particular programmatic emphases.

The problem, of course, is that answering each of these four questions may point us in different service directions. This is where a systematic planning process becomes most challenging. Do the anticipated expanding needs in one program area claim priority over the potential for generating greater resources in another? We will have to balance and constantly rework the equation which includes as variables organizational capabilities, values, expanding needs, and the availability of resources. From out of that equation, the interrelationship of these four areas, we will have to chart our course.

In the final analysis the dictum which some have applied to the business world may be applicable in Jewish communal service as well, namely that the test of a good planner and manager is not the

period of growth, but the period of contraction. Planning for resource scarcity will call upon greater technical skills, but also greater sensitivity and the ability to respond quickly to change, if we are going to be able to refocus our goals, evaluate our programs, and perform the kind of balancing act in planning that will be needed.

At the interorganizational level, the greatest danger resource scarcity may pose is an excess of resource competition and of contest over domain.<sup>3</sup> By domain, I mean not only areas of programming but also of clientele and constituency. Obviously the tendency to protect one's own turf in a period of resource scarcity is going to be great. It is a natural tendency and to some extent I think it is a healthy tendency. Similarly, I would not argue that competition in the delivery of services and programs is in and of itself a bad thing. This is a debate which was carried on at great length 30 years ago in connection with the field of community relations: the dispute over the Maclver Report, and whether or not we should rationalize community relations activities in the American Jewish community by assigning each of the major agencies a specific area and in effect saying stay out of the others. I would suggest, for example, that the sphere of Jewish education should certainly not belong to a single agency such as the synagogue, or even a single agency system, and that the area of services to Jewish families should not be assigned only to Jewish family service agencies.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the comment of Louis Levitt: "As we get smaller, internecine warfare among organizations may intensify as jurisdictions become cloudy and the communal resource base shrinks." "Social Planning as a Political Process," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 56 (Fall 1979), p. 78. For a useful summary of interorganizational theory and an illuminating application to the area of synagogue-federation relations, see Saul Andron, "Synagogue-Federation Relations: An Interorganizational Analysis," (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Brandeis University, 1980). See pp. 199-207 this issue.

On the other hand, it seems to me that we can ill afford in a period of potential resource scarcity the dysfunctions that can arise from excessive competition for resources and domain. It is becoming increasingly obvious when we step back from our own agency setting that old lines of division, lines of service or ideology or clientele or support within the community—that all of these are becoming less relevant to Jewish communal purposes. For example, the line between "Jewish education" and "Jewish communal service" is itself becoming increasingly difficult to draw, and when it is sharply drawn, it is more to the detriment than the benefit of the community. Similarly, lines drawn on the basis of ostensible ideological distinctions—religious/secular, Zionist/non-Zionist, sectarian/non-sectarian—are also increasingly problematic. While diversity of perspective remains a valuable corrective to a potential narrowness of communal vision, one of our achievements during the most recent period in American Jewish life has been the emergence of a more ideologically coherent community.

The translation of this into organizational efforts to embrace multi-faceted services and programs is also largely beneficial. But, if the blurring of ideological and programmatic lines is not to result in chaos, agencies must take seriously their ties to other agencies in the system with shared goals, but differing competencies. One of the dangers which grows from broadened ideological self-definition is that each agency *will* try to do too much: that each agency recognizes quite correctly that concerns for education, family life, communal participation, support for Israel, are all interrelated, and seeks, therefore, to do the whole piece. In a period of resource contraction, this impulse must be resisted. Instead, the greater possibilities for interdependence among organizations due to the breakdown of old lines of division must be accentuated.

For Jewish communal professionals, one key task today is to lead the way in bridging agency and conceptual lines and to build service and program coalitions which minimize needless duplications and institutional aggrandizement. A more rational sharing and allocation of resources and domain may well also make it possible to expand these in absolute terms. To the extent that we are able to approach our fellow Jews not in isolation or competition with one another, but in alliance and coalition, we will be presenting a model of community and of responsible behavior more likely to call forth their allegiance and commitment.<sup>4</sup> Allocation of services and program responsibilities does make sense in some areas. By withdrawing our institutional egos, at least to some extent, we will be able to divide up those areas that can and should be divided in a way that makes best use of the capabilities of each agency, each professional, and each set of volunteers.

Finally, the level of the communal system as a whole. (Here, I am obviously speaking largely about the Federation—agency system, but not exclusively, since the communal system is of course larger than the Federation system alone.) At this level, the great danger during a period of resource scarcity is what I would call “inertialism.” By that, I mean a tendency to move very slowly and along predetermined lines, in terms of the entire process of setting goals and priorities. Again, let me be clear. Avoidance of conflict is not only a valid, but a vital functional goal of the Jewish

communal system, and with a nonexpanding pie, a strategy which emphasizes equity in the way in which we treat all of the different components of the system makes a great deal of sense. We must avoid precipitous changes which could upset the delicate balance of the community. There is no wisdom in trying to respond to scarcity by radical changes in resource distribution if this threatens to disrupt and shatter the entire communal network.

But, an overreliance on what might be called the tried and true wisdom of the past, namely how we have allocated resources last year and the year before that, can be a way of avoiding important decisions and of institutionalizing a creeping decline in the quality of programming and services. It also may well generate a creeping decline in the morale of those who are engaged in the communal enterprise. Unless professional and volunteer leaders feel that there is a possibility of not simply holding the line, but of growing and expanding, if not everywhere, then at least in some areas, we will lose some of that *elan*, some of that sense of our capabilities, that is critical to sustaining the entire mission of the communal system.

There have been a few positive developments in recent years which are potentially important in providing this margin for growth, even in an environment of stability or retrenchment. One is the increasing use of special and designated funds, endowments, funds for Jewish education or synagogue programming. A second is the emphasis now being given to “grantsmanship” as a way of infusing the system with new resources, often for innovative programming. A third is the limited adoption of new budgeting procedures—90 percent or zero-based budgeting—which are designed to allow room for new priorities and programs to compete with established ones. Still, pressure to hold to the status quo, particularly with regard to major budget lines may well grow. If so, there is a danger that we will operate

<sup>4</sup> This was, of course, the rationale for federated campaigning in the first instance. Today, the virtues of this approach needs to be restated and perhaps even extended to other domains of Jewish organizational life. At the same time, it should be recognized that promoting contributor identification with his/her gift (and presumably, therefore, larger contributions) requires that the “abstractness” of the “federation” be mitigated. One answer for this dilemma may lie in the provision of greater opportunities for targeting one’s gift within the framework of a unified campaign.

increasingly in an atmosphere of self-closure, that is, negotiating among ourselves to try to ensure stability and predictability, rather than looking outward into the community to seek new and possibly risky horizons which beckon.

At least a portion of what the communal system expends and allocates should, I believe, be devoted not to programs and services as such, but to research and development, a kind of community investment fund. This portion—5%, 10%, the proper amount is not clear—would be specifically designated as funds to be used for the process of community development. They could be spent in a variety of ways, by existing institutions, new ones, or even ad hoc project groupings. The precise mechanisms for establishing and utilizing these funds within our organizations and communal systems will require trial and error elaboration. But the principle of designating some resources for new ventures aimed at community development is, I believe, vital, and applicable to every sphere of institutional activity.<sup>5</sup>

I want to reiterate in conclusion that the potential dangers noted and strategies of response suggested above at all three levels—intra-organizational, interorganizational, and systemic—are interrelated. How successfully the challenges of resource scarcity are met at one level will have a great impact on what can be done on another level. The three basic strategies of

mitigation I have outlined—striving to avoid goal displacement and institutional distortion by utilizing a calculus for priority setting, developing service and program coalitions involving rational allocations of tasks and functions, and insuring the availability of resources for innovation and community development even in a period of general retrenchment—actually can and should be applied, I would urge, at each level.

There is no question that cutting back, if indeed we must, can be more difficult than growing, for any political system. We see a model in Washington today of how *not* to do this, of how to wield an ideological cleaver in such a fashion that human goals are lost sight of. As a result of widespread perceptions of inequity and insensitivity, I believe that the political system as a whole has lost some of its resiliency and strength. The professionals will, I suggest, have to assume the key role in minimizing the potential damage and distortion to the Jewish communal system in any process of cutting back. This will require not altruism, but an enlightened self-interest, which recognizes that some degree of institutional and perhaps even professional security and stability will have to be risked in order to enhance the responsiveness and purposiveness of the communal system as a whole.

I want to conclude as I began, with a reminder that things are not entirely gloomy. In the face of the possibility of declining resources, we would be tremendously remiss if we did not acknowledge and explore the demonstrable potentials which exist for increasing the generation of resources. This too, whether it is through campaign, increasing levels of affiliation, or ferreting out new funding sources must be seen as a system-wide responsibility. Each organization may well wish and/or be asked to seek new sources of its own, through grants, through solicitation of new types of donors, through new types of service arrangements, whatever. But in the final analysis, we can't define the task of

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<sup>5</sup> The Institution for Jewish Life, which operated under the supervision and authorization of the Council of Jewish Federations for several years in the mid 1970s, was a partial response to this perceived need on a national level. The history of its creation and dissolution (see Gary Rosenblatt, "The Life and Death of a Dream," *Baltimore Jewish Times*, November 7, 1980, pp. 42-55) is a chastening reminder of how difficult institutionalizing such a concept can be. Nevertheless, the need for considerably expanded support for "R & D" within the Jewish community remains. (See the forthcoming volume *Understanding American Jewry*, ed., Marshall Sklare, Transaction Books, 1982.)

generating new resources as belonging to each organization separately or to a single agency, namely the Federation, alone.

Above all, we must collectively resist the temptation to go it alone by hoarding or husbanding our exclusive sources of support. We will sink or swim together, I believe, and in seeking new resources, we must remember that it is the Jewish community as a whole which should be the ultimate beneficiary.

Finally, the sweet that we may be able to draw from the bitter: if our fate for the

immediate future is programmatic retrenchment, this may help push and stimulate us to do better some of the things that should be happening at any time—things like rigorous self-evaluation of our programs, cooperative decision-making, building new bases for participation and support. Let us hope and work that we may be spared the politics of scarcity, but if that is not to be, let us be prepared to face it as another surmountable challenge and as a stimulus to a higher level of Jewish professionalism and of communal development.