SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS LATER: ISSUES CONFRONTING CENTRAL AGENCIES FOR JEWISH EDUCATION

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. . . during the last decade, as certain sociological and demographic changes have come over the Jewish community, the central agencies for Jewish educaton have begun to confront new issues and problems. Some of these are philosophical in character, having to do with the aims and objectives of Bureaus; some are structural, in that they relate to the status of the Bureaus vis-à-vis either their Federations or other agencies within the Federation family; some are programmatic; and others, attitudinal, that is, associated with shifting perceptions people have of them and their shortcomings, which in my judgment are locked into the system in which Bureaus function.

The first successful attempt on this continent to create organized responsibility for Jewish education on a communal basis was undertaken seventy-five years ago, in 1910, by the New York *Kehillah,* the forerunner in a sense of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies. A study conducted the previous year, in which the late Dr. Mordecai Kaplan had played a leading consultative role, had dramatized the chaotic state of Jewish schooling in the community, prompting the *Kehillah* to establish the country's first Bureau of Jewish Education. (Bureau has remained the generic term for central communal agencies of Jewish education.)

Dr. Samson Benderly, a Baltimore physician turned educator, was invited to head the new agency. At a time when only one out of five eligible children in New York were receiving some form of Jewish education—and of those, fully a third were in *hadarim* run by *melamdim*—Benderly's mandate was to achieve cooperation among the educational elements in New York, to familiarize the Jews of the community with the problems of Jewish schooling and the means of solving them, and to operate one or two model schools. In time, Benderly and his lay and professional co-workers enlarged the scope of the Bureau's activity so that, among other things, it attempted "to increase the demand for Jewish education, to organize this demand, to raise funds, to train men and women, to publish textbooks, to experiment with curricula, methods and management."[1]

Although the New York Bureau had its ups and downs, and really did not take firm hold until its successor organization, the Jewish Education Committee of New York—now known as the Board of Jewish Education—was organized nearly thirty years later, it nevertheless had a significant impact on the course of American Jewish education. It enabled Jewish communal leaders in the other large centers of population to recognize that many of the problems confronting Jewish education in their communities might best be resolved by a cooperative effort embodied in a democratically constituted communal organization. In this manner, it paved the way for the establishment of central instrumentalities for Jewish education in Boston in 1918, Philadelphia in 1920,

1. Reported in Israel S. Chipkin, *Twenty-Five Years of Jewish Education in the U.S.* New York: Jewish Education Association of New York City, 1937, p. 36.

Chicago in 1923 and Cleveland in 1924.[2]

By 1936, over a dozen communities had adopted and acted upon the idea that the total community, through some central instrumentality, should sponsor a program of educational services. Today, fifty years later, depending upon whose structural and programmatic criteria one employs, there are anywhere from 49 to 56 such agencies, in addition to 48 Federation committees for Jewish education in non-Bureau cities, that perform selected central services in the spirit of communal responsibility for Jewish education.

As is to be expected in the highly individualistic society that is North American Jewry, no two Bureaus are identical in organizational make-up, operational pattern or program. It can safely be said, however, that almost all Bureaus are engaged in a host of activities which may be grouped as follows: keeping the community informed; coordinating educational effort in areas in which individual institutions cannot function adequately on their own; enriching school curriculum; striving for quality instruction; reaching out to the homes of students and to the adult population generally; working with those who require specialized attention; conducting or assisting in informal educational programs; creating community awareness of Jewish educational needs; and serving as the "local address" for Jewish education.

Few will deny, nor can they, that by and large the Bureaus of Jewish education have had a highly favorable influence upon North American Jewish education. Quite apart from their pedagogic contributions, which have been considerable, their leadership has been felt as educational agents for the enhancement of the sense of community and of *K'lal Yisrael* and in the reduction of institutional isolationism. However, because they have performed in a field whose complexities and obstacles are of a magnitude with which no sister communal agency has had to contend, their success and their difficulties have not been fully appreciated in the past.

Furthermore, during the last decade, as certain sociological and demographic changes have come over the Jewish community, the central agencies for Jewish education have begun to confront new issues and problems. Some of these are philosophical in character, having to do with the aims and objectives of Bureaus; some are structural, in that they relate to the status of the Bureaus vis-à-vis either their Federations or other agencies within the Federation family; some are programmatic; and others, attitudinal, that is, associated with shifting perceptions people have of them and their shortcomings, which in my judgment are locked into the system in which Bureaus function. What follows is an exposition of some of the old and new challenges and dilemmas begging for resolution.

1. CONFLICTING ROLES

Communities recognize that they are in need of a mechanism that can step away from particular educational situations and view them with a minimum of the emotion that interferes with rational judgment; a mechanism that will be at once sympathetic but objective. Bureaus have been expected to serve in this capacity, as the source of judgment and counsel, to assure that local educational programs are kept close to the best interests of both the learners and the Jewish community. But can they genuinely carry out this function so long as they are obliged to contend with their own constituency for a share of the community dollar?

Put somewhat differently, are the service provider functions of a Bureau in conflict with its evaluational role? If its existence is so very dependent on the good

2. Abraham P. Gannes, *Central Community Agencies for Jewish Education*. Philadelphia: Dropsie College, 1954, pp. 1–29.

will of the individuals and institutions it serves, how often can the agency permit itself to "blow the whistle" on bad pedagogic and administrative practices? Can it be an effective catalyst for sound educational procedures without wielding a cat-o'-nine-tails?

Fear of loss of influence has tied the hands of more than one central agency which has opted for prudence as the better part of wisdom. This has led some observers to ask whether, given the nature of the power structures in Jewish communal life, cooperative effort is at all possible in Jewish education without having to compromise important educational principles, let alone institutional integrity.

A few Bureaus claim they have largely resolved the issue by adopting a new approach to provision of service, which presumably has earned them the respect, if not the affection, of the institutions that stand to benefit from their leadership. They are employing a "service agreement" concept in the design and delivery of central consultative and evaluative services to affiliated schools. A formal document is drafted which is expressly tailored to the individual institution. It sets forth specific areas for improvement, as well as the desired ends, both jointly accepted in writing by the lay and professional leadership of the school and the Bureau. Moreover, it details mutually accountable ways in which both parties will plan together regularly to effect the necessary changes. Priorities are fixed, expectations listed, responsibilities assigned, a schedule projected, and monitoring procedures established.

Under this arrangement, it is claimed that the Bureau is viewed as more of a partner than an adversary, since it has a solid stake in the outcomes, thereby removing potential hostility from the relationship with the evaluative agency. A pre-condition for success, it would seem, is that the local Federation proclaim its absolute confidence in the central agency and not be tempted, as some Federations regrettably are, to second-guess the educational body or to send advertent signals that the schools may circumvent the Bureau and use the Federation as a court of last resort.

2. CONFLICTING OPERATIONAL PHILOSOPHIES

Federations, as a rule, move forward on the wheels of consensus, a working philosophy which, more often than not, compels them to think and act in least common denominator terms. Can their expecting a similar mode of operation and aspiration of their Bureaus truly lead to quality instruction and management, which are so desperately needed in Jewish education and which, in my judgment, will not occur unless we daringly break out of present molds, even if this means stepping on a few toes in the process? The Federation approach may be required for maximum fund-raising results; it will not bring salvation, however, for Jewish education.

3. PLANNING AUTHORITY

What began not many years ago as a decidedly limited planning role for Federations in Jewish education has grown beyond recognition in many communities. In fact, in some places, Federations have even begun moving into areas that are unquestionably functional in character, ofttimes to the exclusion of Bureau personnel. Is this new Federation presence in Jewish education beginning to have a negative impact on the authority and leadership function of central educational agencies?

Quite apropos, what constitutes "planning" and at what point does it cross the line of demarcation into operation? Equally serious, can planning for any field realistically be divorced from thorough inside knowledge of and extensive ex-

perience with that field? This very question was raised a little over a year ago by William Kahn, Executive Vice-President of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York, at a Social Planners Institute conducted by the Council of Jewish Federations. These were his observations:

> Federation social planners. . . guide and orchestrate the budget and planning processes in their communities. They interface with the agencies and with lay leadership in a variety of areas and have substantial power. . . what they pick up and relate to lay leadership gives them very substantial power. While the laymen play the policy-making role, we are aware of the very key role that Federation professionals play in agenda development and policy determination. . . I am mildly troubled as I look at who are the planners. A surprising number come directly to Federation either from graduate schools of social work or from schools of public administration. Many lack a functional agency experience. I think there is a price we pay in such a case.[3]

To say, as some social planners do, that their province is primarily planning issues and only tangentially Jewish educational questions, is a rhetorical rather than a realistic distinction. It cannot hold up as long as planning policies impinge upon educational practice, as they almost inevitably must.

If, then, policy and planning gradually are crystallizing at levels other than the Bureau, are we running the risks of stymying the types of initiatives which only an educator can put forward, confusing the community by diminishing the leadership role of the Bureau in the eyes of its constituency, and, quite possibly, closing the door to good professionals who may wish to consider Bureau work as a career but will shy clear of it for fear it will never tap their fullest potential as educators? Can one hope that, in their relationship with the local central educational body, Federations will learn to be prominent without being dominant?

At the 49th Annual Conference of the National Council for Jewish Education, held in June, 1975, I delivered a paper on educational planning in which I stated:

> Working alone, educators have limited usefulness as agents of change. By the same token, community organization professionals working without the input of educators must inevitably discover that their contemplated reforms in the quality of Jewish life are longer on promise than on results. It would be naive to inflate the leadership potential of the Jewish educator in the face of current sociological realities, but it would be fatal for Jewish life in this country to undervalue the role and capabilities of the cadre of men and women who currently serve in the ranks of Jewish education. . ."[4]

4. BUREAU PERFORMANCE

It is widely agreed that, given the mountainous hurdles we must overcome in Jewish education, the present levels of Bureau funding and staff resources guarantee less than fully satisfactory results. Notwithstanding this rather common admission, Bureaus are constantly asked to raise their sights "boldly and imaginatively." Is communal leadership aping Pharaoh in demanding the quota of bricks while withholding the ingredients with which to produce them?

Realistically, how many bold and imaginative measures can a Bureau institute without a responsive Federation, synagogue and school leadership? Having been on loan for an extended period of my career to the very largest Jewish communal agency on the continent, and obliged to

3. This *Journal*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (Summer 1985), p. 317.

4. "Educational Planning for Commitment," *Jewish Education*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Fall-Winter, 1976), p. 31.

sit through countless committee meetings and budget hearings at which one creative, forward-moving idea after another was shot down, I speak from first-hand experience. Indeed, were Federations to take a forthright look at how they themselves operate, they would see the unusual degree to which their planning is tradition-bound, past-oriented, and narrowly-focused.

For that matter, how many of our communal institutions and organizations have a track record of having been moved, year after year, by significantly new priorities or inspiringly new perspectives? Yet it is frequently the lay and professional leadership of these very agencies who are extraordinarily impatient with and uninhibitedly critical of the Bureau when it fails to sparkle with innovative programming. They simply refuse to recognize the plain fact that most problems in Jewish education do not lend themselves to quick solutions, and that many may never be resolved, however adept, imaginative, or skillful Jewish education professionals may become.

5. THE SIGNALS WE SEND

Who is really monitoring the expenditure of community funds for Jewish education? For years, many Federations have been involved in the subsidization of schools. In addition, during the past ten years, some Federations have either established or expanded grant programs through which they dole out significant sums *directly* to a variety of local educational institutions. Does the Bureau play a substantive role both in the determination of the projects or organizations to be subsidized and in the evaluation of performance? If it does not—and in a large proportion of situations it is not invited to exercise these functions—what kind of message does this transmit to the community concerning the effectuality and competence of the Bureau? Are the Federations in question permitting themselves to send similar signals with respect to their constituent social work and group work agencies?

6. DUAL OR TRIPLE AGENCIES AHEAD?

There is growing divisiveness in the ranks of religious Jewry, to a point where some observers are seriously questioning whether we are indeed one people, or will long remain one. The increasing polarization of religious camps and the unabashed delegitimization of ideological denominations other than one's own, which we are currently witnessing, may be foretelling the most calamitous division of our people since the Karaitic movement. In a recent article bespeaking "the principle and the priority of Klal Yisrael (the unity and totality of the Jewish people)," Irving Greenberg stated: "One can project a cycle of alienation, hostility, and withdrawal that will lead to a sundering of the Jewish people into two religious or two social groups, fundamentally divided and opposed to each other."[5] Is this an omen that the coordinative and unifying role of the Bureau is in peril?

For nearly four decades, Bureau personnel have painfully cultivated what appeared to be a growing sensitivity among the Jewish religious groupings to work together for the common good. Moved by a spirit of inclusiveness, they have labored hard to develop an educational ethic of openness, attempting to service all groups in the community irrespective of their ideological stances. It may even be said that, in a real sense, they have demonstrated a genius for respecting and learning to live with opposing ideological views. Moreover, not only have they respected differences but, in many instances, have encouraged and worked to protect them, provided certain minimum educational essentials were adhered to and

5. "We Are Two," *Baltimore Jewish Times,* July 5, 1985, p. 52

accepted. "Unity in diversity" has been their motto.

One shudders to contemplate the consequences, should the climate of religious strife spill over into the educational domain. Already there are elements in several communities that would deny a consultative pedagogic role in their institutions to anyone, even of their own religious bent, who at some point served other denominational groups. In their constricted view, the very act of consorting with educators identified with the other religious movements is a disqualifying influence.

7. EDUCATIONAL PRIORITIZATION

Since the dollars allocated to the central educational agency are palpably insufficient for it to do a first-rate job in all service areas, the Federation cry—an across-the-board position not generally limited to any single constituent—is "prioritize, be selective." But Jewish education is fundamentally unlike other spheres of communal endeavor in that it is, as a lay leader of a Midwestern Bureau put it, "a structure of equal first priorities." Its multiple needs are reminiscent of Israel's dilemma during the Six-Day War when all fronts had to be defended simultaneously.

Besides, new needs constantly keep emerging, e.g., family programming, intergenerational education, the training of young leadership, innovative approaches to informal teaching, etc., etc. Do we dare let up our defenses in other critical areas in order to cope with these new challenges? If Baltimore was able to achieve breakthroughs in several of these newer activities, it is primarily because of appreciably increased funding. Is there another way? The problem is even more critical in the Bureau with a one or two-person professional staff, still all-too-common a phenomenon on the continent.

8. BUREAU/DAY SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS

The day school movement has blossomed beyond the wildest dreams of its early proponents and the most extreme fears of its initial detractors. Day schools are a major force in Jewish education today and are the recipients of over 25% of all Federation funding of local Jewish educational undertakings. Still, in many communities, they consistently refuse badly needed central services.

Few of these schools operate at their highest potential. In spite of the qualitative edge day schools have over the supplementary schools, many of their teachers are at substandard levels of preparedness and competence. Is it not time for Federations to reevaluate in earnest the tenuous—and in some places nonexistent—relationship between the day school and the Bureau, a condition which their funding practices have only encouraged?

Circumstances today are not markedly different from those that prevailed 18 years ago when I delivered a paper on "Federation Patterns of Financing Jewish Education" at the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations in Atlanta. Many of these schools desire, and continue to receive, community money without having to meet any requirements. In 1968 I cited a string of instances in which Federation leadership admitted that the subsidies were "keep the peace" gestures rather than critically and intelligently thought-through investments to improve Jewish schooling in the community. The subsidy picture has remained an almost incredible product of accommodation and of knuckling under to pressure groups. In this day and age, a community should have some objective assurance that its financial assistance is related to the upgrading of standards.

An allocation to an educational institution should be more than a political decision; it should be an educational decision. In a time of crisis—and Jewish education on these shores is at a crisis stage—educational subsidies should not be made, may I be forgiven the expression, either on a "pork barrel" basis or in order to get certain people off one's back.

9. BUREAU/SISTER AGENCY RELATIONS

In many communities, Bureaus and their sister agencies, i.e., the Jewish family and children's service, the Jewish community center, the Jewish big brother and big sister organization, have long gone their separate ways. The Bureaus have not been related to educational processes taking place in informal structures under non-school auspices. Will the new directive from the National Jewish Welfare Board to its affiliated JCCs to "maximize their Jewish educational effectiveness" aggravate the problem?

One can only applaud the decision to inject a greater measure of Jewish educational content in community center programming. That Jewish organizations generally are becoming more Jewish education oriented is clearly a salutary development. Hopefully this new awareness will get the patient on the road to recovery, but I would hate to see one of the key attending physicians, the Bureau, court a nervous breakdown in the process.

Despite the fact that flexibility and the mobilization of other-agency resources are major elements in the charge issued by the JWB to its constituency, to date, with possibly two notable exceptions, there has been no concrete evidence of any serious dialogue, plan, or proposal, either on the local or national levels, to carry the concept of collaborative effort forward. Quite the contrary! Almost everything one hears or reads tends to indicate that Jewish community centers, even in communities with strong, well-established central educational agencies which have a history of solid accomplishment in educational realms customarily dubbed "informal," are going it alone. What is more, in a number of communities where Bureau personnel took the initiative and proffered assistance, not only has their hand of cooperation not been welcomed, but the Bureau and the Center are locking horns. One wonders: in addition to the spectacle of inter-agency warfare, are we headed for competition for professional personnel in a market that is already in short supply?

Underlying the problem, it appears to me, is an artificial separation which has been created between formal and informal education that, until now, no self-respecting educator could conceive of, much less accept. For during the past two decades, some people have been discussing informal Jewish education as though it were a brand new phenomenon on the Jewish cultural scene. Actually, it has been with us a long time, perhaps as long as Judaism itself. Even within institutions of so-called formal instruction, affective (as informal educational experiences are occasionally called) education has been an organic feature, to wit, children's theater, club activity, school newspapers, junior congregation, visits to Jewish communal institutions, dramatizations, music programs, arts and crafts activity, Keren Ami, holiday assemblies and celebrations, Shabbatonim, etc.

While there is no must that they be correlated with formal schooling, Jewish summer camping, Israel study tours, festival celebrations and other leisure-time educational experiences enhance schooling—and, in turn, stand to be enhanced—where there is an organic tie-in with classroom activity that either precedes, follows, or is part of it. A tour

of Israel, as an example, assumes immeasurably greater value when its itinerary is intertwined with or built upon formal educational experiences that prepared the way for it. The Israel trip then becomes more than a sightseeing excursion only casually related to a young person's Jewish association. By virtue of its integration in a formal learning setting, the visit abroad becomes an "in-school experience" which, among other benefits, also has the effect of giving Jewish schooling a positive dimension in a young person's consciousness.

To the extent possible, therefore, we should be seeking ways to fuse the learning and experiential aspects of Jewish education and thereby produce integrated connections and meanings. The supplementary Jewish school, in particular, because of the limited amount of class time it offers, should be encouraged to call upon the child's leisure hours, e.g., Shabbat, Sunday afternoons, vacation periods, the summer, for related co-curricular and extra-curricular (read informal) educational experiences. And this is an area in which JCC staff expertise and JCC facilities can be called into service. The other side of the coin is that a considerable number of Jewish educators have both knowledge of Jewish content and group dynamics and group work skills that should be harnessed to assist the JCCs and the various other organizations in the community in adding Jewish dimensions to their current programs.

Of course, no one can guarantee that a cooperative approach will necessarily bring the hoped-for results. On the other hand, without a unified and disciplined process, outstanding achievement is quite inconceivable. How, therefore, do Federations begin forging a meaningful, collaborative inter-agency work process to replace the present turfism? Moreover, what might Bureaus do on their own initiative to create new alliances with sister agencies, so they may together speak to the total Jewish educational concerns of their communities?

10. REGIONALIZATION

It is a given that Jewish educational needs have multiplied far beyond the allocation capacity of the Federations. And, as each year goes by, inflation shrinks the buying power of even the present dollars. This raises an interesting question: in many parts of the continent, could not some educational activity be undertaken regionally? Twenty years ago, while with the American Association for Jewish Education, I tried unsuccessfully to sell two communities, fifty miles apart, on an inter-city teacher certification program. The following year, I proposed in vain to the professional educational leadership of eight Midwestern communities that they embark upon a jointly sponsored teacher in-service and curriculum development venture that would make use of a roving faculty, the summer months, and other vacation periods.

Twenty years have passed, and I am still convinced that there is validity in a Bureau consortium approach; that we ought to be exploring the possibilities of pooling expertise, purchasing services from nearby communities, and the like. Israel programs, publications, teacher education, youth retreats, and Shabbatonim are but a few of the undertakings lending themselves to regional sponsorship and funding.

Today distances are not the formidable obstacles they once were. A much greater impediment is overcoming the tendency in some communities—and the larger the community the more pronounced the tendency—to keep what we have to ourselves and to introduce our people only to locally conceived or produced materials. It is a form of educational trade protectionism.

The present organization of services places undue responsibilities upon the in-

dividual community. It is not necessary for each Bureau to reinvent the wheel. Every Bureau, without exception, is professionally understaffed. None possesses the vast, almost staggering assortment of competencies needed to be of aid in the multifarious educational situations that arise. It therefore appears to me that one of the solutions may be regionalized ventures, augmented and assisted by JESNA input. To be sure, JESNA would have to be beefed up to render such service. The overall result, however, is bound to be improved local educational activity.

11. CONCLUDING ISSUE

I have raised ten issues and a number of subissues. Now I pose the all-important question: Let us assume, for the sake of discussion, that appropriately creative responses are forthcoming to *all* of the challenges and dilemmas I have presented. Would the Bureaus then have the capacity to turn things around for us in Jewish education without (a) a lay, professional, and rabbinic constituency that is more supportive, (b) Federations that invest them in cloaks of greater authority, (c) a parent clientele that is less indifferent to things Jewish, (d) teachers who are not as disgruntled and lacking in morale as they are today, and justifiably so, by the treatment accorded them, and (e) students who attend classes for more than two to two-and-a-half hours a week, and then with half a heart and a third of their mental ability? Pragmatically, in other words, seventy-five years after the formation of the first Bureau, what accomplishments do we genuinely have a right to expect of central educational agencies?

The New York Kehillah's vision of communal responsibility for Jewish education ushered in an undeniably new epoch in Jewish life in North America. An extraordinarily inspired effort is required to clothe the Bureau concept in more vivid reality, as well as to reenergize the Bureau mechanism. One can only pray that it will not have to take another seventy-five years to achieve this.