

# OUR JEWISH RENAISSANCE: REFLECTIONS AND RENEWAL

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*While we struggle with definitions as to who we are—Jewish Center professionals, Jewish communal professionals, social workers, educators, and so forth, one constant remains: That our primary purpose and indivisible commitment are to exercise whatever skills we possess, in whatever form our individuality determines, to help people feel greater confidence and joy as Jews with programs that illuminate learning, teach the beauty and balance of our values, savor the sanctity and sweetness of our Sabbath, invite the exhilarating celebration of our customs, and perhaps, most of all, communicate a faith that life has more meaning with every incremental act of Jewish living.*

I am genuinely honored to have been asked to deliver the Max Tasgal presentation. Although I did not have the good fortune of being supervised by Max, as was last year's presenter, Bernie Rosen, I have participated with him in executive seminars and am familiar with his work and reputation as a distinguished professional who helped establish a foundation of standards for our field. I have often been accused of romanticizing the past, and this may be so. But I also recall, with abiding affection, my own supervisors, people like Max, who were not only executives, more importantly, they were "thinkers." Discussions on philosophy, values, ethical issues, and psychology took up as much if not more, time, as did program and administration. I will never forget what Bob Glass at the Bronx House said to me when I recorded prior to Purim that two of my teenagers jokingly said to me: It's Purim and there's Dubin—expect a discussion—and Bob said, "Now you have arrived."

With Max and others like him, we were taught to enter people's lives and to help make it better for them. Never did the individual become a program unit; always

the needs and growth of the individual were at the heart of our work. Program was but a means, not an end. It is indeed fitting that we remind ourselves each year what the Max Tasgals mean to our profession and how so much of what we do has been inspired by their character and commitment.

Today, I am offering reflections on our Jewish Renaissance. "Reflections" are a privilege accorded to senior professionals. Thus, after 23 years, I became entitled to use my career as a source to reflect on a subject that touches us deeply. I have chosen to make brief observations on ten issues related to our Jewish development and I introduce them by topical allusions, as follows:

1. *Affiliation*
2. *Turf*
3. *Our Trademark*
4. *We are Learning Centers*
5. *Jewish Tracks*
6. *The Why Me Syndrome*
7. *The Jewish Budget Line*
8. *The Lubavitch Touch*
9. *The Depth Crisis*
10. *Renewal—Burning On*

## Affiliation

I begin with "affiliation" because I believe it signals a significant change in our field.

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There was a time when this term was used exclusively in reference to synagogue membership. Now, people experience a palpable connection between Center activities and their own Jewishness and they apply the term "affiliation" to the Center as well as the synagogue and in some cases instead of the synagogue.

There was a time when our Centers were publicly castigated for being Jewishly deficient, most often by the rabbinic community. Today, many within this same group castigate us because we listened to them and became more Jewish. The use of the term "affiliation" in relation to Centers bespeaks the great strides we have made from becoming a supplementary factor in Jewish life to a primary force in Jewish education.

There is much evidence to support the statement that in regard to Jewish content we are progressing from the episodic model which is periodic to the environmental model which is permeative. And, with the help of the experiential research of JWB and its commission work, we can now feel comfortable with the concept of Jewish education as indigenous to the mission of the Jewish community center. We are more creative and committed than ever before and our work processes are beginning to match our word processes. Rejoice with me as I recall some of the striking programs of Jewish education presented by Centers at a recent JWB Program Conference:

1. Project Connect of the 92nd Street Y: an entry point program designed to integrate young Jewish families into Jewish communal life.
2. Community Colleges of Jewish Studies in Washington and Columbus.
3. The Home Precious Legacy Program involving Jewish artifacts for home celebrations in Houston.
4. The Tikun Olam program in San Francisco providing a vehicle for Jewish responses to the critical issues of our world.

5. The Curriculum of Jewish Study for Professional Staff in Chicago.

6. The Resident Scholar program at the Palisades JCC.

7. The Jewish Open School Enrichment Program in Mid-Westchester.

8. The Olam Shehaya — World That Was multi-faceted program on Jewish history in Buffalo.

9. The Joys of Jewish Learning Program in Dallas.

10. The Jewish Free University for college students in Metro-West New Jersey. And so forth.

To be sure, the use of the term "affiliation" may suggest problems of auspices. But at the same time, this new perception of our Centers, particularly among those "exploratory Jews" seeking a Jewish connection, symbolizes the enormous progress we have made in making good on our commitment to contribute meaningfully to a vital Jewish continuity by strengthening identification through knowledge and awareness. For this we should feel good and proud.

With growth, however, comes problems and there is a kind of bittersweet chapter that has surfaced with this positive development. It is best captured by the following observation:

#### Turf

I believe in the concept of linkages, consortiums and all the other fancy descriptions for involving others, broadening our base and diminishing conflict. I also believe we should concern ourselves less with the matter of auspices and credit and more with the matter of content and delivery. When a Jewish educational need is identified, our Centers should attempt to facilitate a response to that need, utilizing good community processes even if it means that others ultimately deliver the service. If our purposes are altruistic, they then will have been achieved.

But there are times when gaping service gaps are left in the community because

others do not want us to sponsor a program, for example, for fear that it might discourage people from joining synagogues because we are offering an alternative. What do we do after we have made every effort to interpret the need, every assurance to respect other "turf," and every effort at co-sponsorship, even recruit for other "turf," and we still face resistance because to others gaping holes are better than perceived competition?

My answer is simple. The reality is that our Centers are serving substantial numbers of "unconnected Jews" who have found something palatable and non-threatening in our Centers, and for a variety of reasons, are not yet ready to join other Jewish institutions where demands for Jewishness might be perceived as beyond their readiness. We cannot and must not yield to demands to keep our service superficial. We must maximize our opportunities to help these members move forward to more meaningful forms of Jewish expression and we must have the guts to remain steadfast in the face of opposition, particularly if we had already observed appropriate community processes.

I believe our communities are not so brittle that they could no longer function synergistically because one agency had the courage to "go for it" and stand up to its convictions.

#### **Our Trademark**

There are three areas of Jewish education in which I firmly believe the Center is unrivaled in effectiveness of method and mentality. I have identified them elsewhere as ethnic counselling, experiential education, and interventive education. I confess some degree of chauvinism but I also believe my arguments are more than defensible.

Ethnic counselling involves the use of creative consciousness-raising exercises, such as role playing, free associative questions and prioritization techniques, and so

forth, wherein participants are helped to explore themselves as Jews, to sort out their conflicts and to evolve a positive philosophy as Jews.

Experiential activity focuses on the affective as much or more than on the cognitive in which learning comes from living and knowledge is caught as well as taught. It includes such programs as Shabbat and holiday workshops, retreats, *chavurah* groups, a Chassidic wedding at camp, and the like.

Interventive education is the artful activity of sensitive professionals who know how to seize a "teachable moment" to stimulate discussion and reflection.

We still cherish the small group as the major program unit in the Center and many staff have skills in utilizing that unit as a medium of positive influence. Ethnic counselling or *ethnotherapy* lends itself to group work skills. Experiential Jewish activity lends itself to program skills. Interventive education lends itself to social work, education, or counselling skills where antennae are tuned in for signals.

As a parent of three children who have attended day schools in more than one city, I have witnessed that these three models of Jewish education are not the cornerstone of the day school curriculum. I have offered further illustrations of these three models in an earlier article and I am convinced that our Centers are uniquely equipped, particularly if we are conceptually conscious of their potential, to project and deliver this brand of service that would give us a distinctive trademark in the field of Jewish education.

#### **We are Learning Centers**

If there is one thing I have learned in my career, it is this: never underestimate people nor their capacity to learn. Language exposes conduct. For students of Talmud and other Jewish texts, we use the word "learning" as in learning in a *Yeshiva*. For less ambitious study, as in community classes, we use the words "informal educa-

tion." I am convinced that in our Centers, we can engage in "learning" as well as "education." Talmud, commentaries and Jewish texts, when taught creatively and sensitively, are rich and meaningful sources of Jewish education and study for our Centers. Without doubt, one does not require a Yeshiva education to engage in Talmudic study. I will never forget participating with a group of attorneys, who had no formal Jewish education, in a semi-monthly Talmudic discussion on the Tractate Baba Metziyah and its dialectic content concerning religious and civil law.

I have seen lay leadership exult in discussion on Jewish values and philosophy utilizing concepts from the bible, Maimonides, rabbinic dialogue in the oral Torah, and other commentaries. I have seen staff members discuss scholarship policies based on reactions to Hillel's interpretation of charity and I have witnessed discussion on other Jewish values, of community, family, sanctity, and so on, in relation to contemporary Jewish issues.

Further, I would heartily recommend a philosophical bent in our Jewish education program for adults that is issues-and values-oriented because it is a science with which adults and lay leadership can identify. A philosophical orientation flushes our issues which are then tested through textual inquiry.

In one resident scholar program, adult groups were conducted on the following topics, led by a Jewish educator with a background in philosophy and utilizing Jewish texts and group discussion:

1. A Community of Opposites; Can We Live Together?
2. Major Dilemmas in Jewish Life — Who Is a Jew?
3. Did G-d Die During the Holocaust?
4. Does G-d Answer Christian Prayers?
5. Orthodox and Non-Orthodox Judaism — Can We Live Together?
6. Messianism and the After-Life — the Hope, the Power and the Danger

## 7. Authority and Creativity Within the Jewish Tradition

I end discussion of this sub-topic with the following challenge. It is within our power to shape our own destiny. And that destiny will be determined by our own confidence and self-image as a wellspring for Jewish education. Our programs in range and substance reflect our belief in ourselves. I believe when, in the past, we saw ourselves as supplementary, we operated with self-imposed limitations. Without changing our purpose or character and given the significant number we serve and their obvious needs, we must now raise our sights, uplift our image, take pride in our resourcefulness, and demonstrate that we are "learning centers" as well as community centers and that our members could be learning Jews as well as learned Jews.

### Jewish Tracks

I would like to share with you one particular formula I have found helpful in planning a well-rounded program of Jewish education. It is the concept of Jewish tracks. A curricular outline in which specific program tracks are identified is an effective instrument in which to plan and gauge a comprehensive program which also lends itself to evaluation. The Jewish Education Planning Guide, soon to be issued by JWB, includes such an outline. It offers a structured approach to setting goals and expectations and to measuring performance.

Further, tracks become traditions and over the years familiarity with these track-traditions stimulates participation. It is an excellent public relations technique as well. In one Center, the Jewish Perspective Series, the Joys of Judaism Festival, the Chair of Jewish Studies and the College of Jewish Learning have become rather famous annual program traditions, and consequently are beginning to sell themselves.

### The Why Me Syndrome

Twenty-one years ago I noted in a worker's evaluation that he had done little to instill Jewish content into his program. He responded by commenting, "Why are you injecting this negative comment; no other worker has this included in his evaluation?" And he was right. Other supervisors talked about Jewish content but it was not included in their standards of accountability.

The point is obvious but needs to be reinforced. If we mean what we say about our Jewish commitment and mission, should the contribution of Jewish content be any less of a significant criterion of job performance than organization skills, program skills or even relationship skills. If it is noted explicitly as a job expectation in the hiring process, a procedure which I would like to believe has become standard by now, is it not logical and fair to include it in the evaluation as well, a process designed to measure job expectations?

Perhaps the most effective means of forewarning staff that Jewish program skills are an integral component of evaluation is by insuring that this item is part of the supervisory agenda as worker and supervisor work together supportively to build a program. If there was a unitary approach to identifying Jewish skills in both the hiring and evaluation process, perhaps my worker of twenty-one years ago would not have felt on such safe ground in challenging my observation and I would not have had to struggle to explain how supervision is a matter of personality.

### The Jewish Budget Line

Some exciting trails have been blazed in the Center's Jewish education services, particularly with the addition of Jewish education directors in select agencies. These Centers have put their budgets alongside their beliefs and there is ample evidence that these new staff positions

make a significant difference in converting commitment to practice.

I do not accept the notion that budgetary restraints prevent us from engaging educators and scholars who can infuse quality and depth into our Jewish programs. Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles, JCC Palisades and perhaps others did not have these staff positions in their budgets a few years ago. They do now and what's more, these professionals are getting their paychecks regularly.

When needs are identified as priorities, our industry has always been able to generate the funds to implement these priorities. Witness the incredible growth of facilities and the multi-millions raised to build them even during the worst of times. We have a proud tradition of being great risk-takers, and more often than not, when we "go for it," not withstanding the hardship and struggle, we come out of it not only surviving but surviving with strength.

Further, I have found from experience that endowment funds specifically earmarked for Jewish education are least difficult to raise in terms of support for operating services. Jewish education has never been more popular within the philanthropic community and with assertive effort, benefactors are out there to be found to attach their names to meaningful Jewish program tracks.

To those Centers who aspire to create new staff positions of Jewish leadership, and who truly want to take a dramatic step forward, I suggest that claims about budget restraints cannot be acknowledged until all those fundraising stones have been overturned and all opportunities to "make it happen" exercised.

To those who feel that a Jewish educator or scholar position is not necessarily the best route to achieve higher Jewish levels, I simply ask that they observe the programmatic impact of these leadership positions which can now be documented and look objectively at the alternatives. I

also caution against rationalization.

#### The Lubavitch Touch

At a recent conference, following the formal sessions, a number of workers began to engage in Israeli dancing. It was contagious and many joined in. A worker and friend next to me said, "This is not my thing, I just can't jump in," and I thought about the Lubavitch touch.

I admit a bias and a soft spot for the Lubavitch movement partly growing out of a personal life experience, but mostly because in the last ten years, "I've done some good business with them" and Center members were the beneficiaries.

They believe in the importance of every "rung on the ladder" climbing upwards towards higher levels of Jewish living and this reminds me of some of the principles I learned in social work education related to "acceptance" and "starting where people are." Theirs is an unadulterated, undisguised and uninhibited brand of Judaism. They know who they are and in their joyous expression of the traditions of Jewish life, they convey to the rest of us that Judaism is not to be viewed as a religion of prohibition but, rather, as a celebration of life.

This is what we can learn from them: to shed the shackles of our tightness and uncertainty, to peel the layers of professional sophistication and to learn to experience uninhibitedly the joys of Judaism, and, yes, to jump in on the dancing. It is this spark or spontaneity, which is a manifestation of knowing "who we are" that would lift and liberate us towards new vistas of personal identity and visions of professional achievement.

#### The Depth Crisis

*Rav* Joseph Soloveitchik, the great Talmudic scholar, identifies two types of Jews. Those who are thoughtful, introspective, and struggle with the perplexing questions of life: what lies beyond

secularism; how does one understand and speak about G-d; what is the ultimate mission in being. This is the group who suffer from the vexations of insight and who experience the depth crisis.

The other group is less tormented by personal struggles to understand the meaning of life. They are distracted by diversions and have become absorbed in narcissism. They seek pleasure in the relentless pursuit of hedonism and they appear to live a life of blissful ignorance. They do not even know of all that meaningful suffering they are missing with all their pleasure and "happiness."

It has often been said by our teachers and role models that lifting of standards of Jewish content in Jewish community centers is, in large measure, dependent upon the strengthening of the Jewish identity and motivation of Center staff.

It is within this context that I recall the two groups identified by *Rav* Soloveitchik and am moved to urge Center professionals to join the ranks of the sufferers of this world. In pursuing activity that could illuminate self-awareness and knowledge, personally and spiritually, and challenge our potential, even as it may raise us to higher levels of confusion in the process and cause suffering, we will ultimately resurge more enlightened and effective as Jews and professionals.

The tug of hedonism and complacency, often disguised as relaxation, is powerful and it takes discipline and commitment to budget one's time in a way that includes some allocation for Jewish learning, a book of Jewish content, a lecture, a class, or even some personal reflection. I do not believe that such activity will lead us down the same path as Elisha Ben Abuyah, the pious rabbi and scholar of Milton Steinberg's *As A Driven Leaf*, who abandoned Judaism because he could not reconcile reason with religion. We are not in this category and although we may suffer with our searching, we should emerge

pridefully, with greater substance, skill and satisfaction.

#### Renewal—Burning On

For professional staff, perhaps the greatest attribute of the Jewish community center is that, unlike the assembly line opportunities for creative and individualized expression are unlimited. More often than not, programs are partly a reflection of the unique personality of the worker. In a sense, the worker's "fingerprints," can in time, be detected on individual programs. Our system encourages this kind of freedom and in some measure, our jobs become fashioned by the expressions of our unique selves.

This dynamic ingredient which stimulates innovative activity gives our profession a distinct and desirable character. Having said this, I must also acknowledge that even within this seminal environment, we cannot escape the inevitable problem of burn-out.

I believe every worker, at some point in his career, experiences stress and burn-out in varying degrees despite the nurturance of the ambiance. All that giving to others, all those demands and pressures, all the absorbed criticism, fatigue and emotional depletion must take its toll by virtue of our humanness.

In some cases, there are even further complications related to self-doubt and dashed dreams. Perhaps this is why I ac-

cepted this assignment, as it gave me the opportunity to convey the enormous personal high I experience when I witness the birth of a new Jewish education service forming within my agency. Whether it originates with myself or staff, the pleasure I feel is energizing, particularly when it appears that the program is truly affecting Jewish consciousness. When there is impact, and change in behavior and lifestyle is evident, the satisfaction I experience is a tonic for tedium and an antidote for burn-out, monotony and the daily grind. It is a most meaningful and constructive prescription to kick the blues and to self-inoculate for reinvigoration. I hope others feel the same way or in time come to experience these same feelings.

While we struggle with definitions as to who we are—Jewish Center professionals, Jewish communal professionals, social workers, educators, and so forth, one constant remains: that our primary purpose and indivisible commitment are to exercise whatever skills we possess, in whatever form our individuality determines, to help people feel greater confidence and joy as Jews with programs that illuminate learning, teach the beauty and balance of our values, savor the sanctity and sweetness of our Sabbath, invite the exhilarating celebration of our customs, and perhaps, most of all, communicate a faith that life has more meaning with every incremental act of Jewish living.