

CANON AND ICONS

In Search of a Jewish Communal Service Profession

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Two words—icon and canon—help us understand Ralph Goldman’s contributions to the field of Jewish communal service. Icon is defined by Webster’s as “a picture or image or other representation” drawing on the Greek word *eikon* for likeness, image, or figure. In Christian thought this translates into a representation of a sacred image. Though surely Ralph is no sacred image, just as surely he has become an icon for those of us who appreciate the powerful influence he has had now for nearly seventy years. I use the word “canon” in Webster’s sense of “the body of rules, principles or standards accepted as axiomatic and universally binding in a field of study.” Throughout his career, Ralph has contributed to the canon of the field through his writings and speeches – drawing on extensive practice grounded in a Jewish humanistic set of values (see his article on pp. 73–82).

The field of Jewish communal service suffers amnesia on a large scale. We have almost no icons who are appreciated, looked up to, and/or remembered from decade to decade. No comprehensive history of the field even exists. Few classes in Jewish communal service history are even taught. It would be hard to think of another field of service that has done so little to honor its own past and those who helped shape the services and institutions of today, which we take for granted.

Neither is there any canon — texts and teachings we feel are essential for anyone claiming to be a Jewish communal worker—for Jewish communal service. Books, practice principles—the very crucibles from which our values flow—as well as wisdom and insight from the past that are permanent and usable from one generation to the next

are forgotten, although sometimes they are discovered as a “new idea.”

How can we claim there is even something called a field of Jewish communal service, let alone a profession, when we are so fragmented? Recent research published by scholars at Brandeis University has even suggested a new label – Jewish sector service—for our profession (Kelner et al., 2004). The research suggests we do not meet the criteria for a field as “a sphere of activity, interest, etc. especially within a particular business or profession” and that it is more reflective of reality to describe sectors of service, such as community centers, family services, and federations. It is clear that little is perceived as bonding. All who work on behalf and within the Jewish community identify themselves by their settings more frequently than they do with others who work in Jewish settings different from their own.

The apex of the conference of Jewish Communal Service (now called the Jewish Communal Service Association of North America) was reached in the early 1980s when perhaps as many as a third of all who called themselves Jewish communal workers (except rabbis and cantors) belonged to the organization through its various professional groupings. Since that time, as responses to Jewish concerns splintered and became more individuated, so have the communal workers. Those that affiliated professionally at all (a decreasing number) did so by increasingly identifying themselves by the settings in which they worked.

Today as we revisit Ralph’s essay a quarter-century later, the vexing problems of recruitment and retention that he cited remain. The field appears more fractionated than ever. There is weak organizational commitment, to say nothing of relatively little com-

mitment to Jewish communal service as a whole. Although since he wrote the article about a dozen graduate programs dedicated to Jewish communal service were established in the United States, there still is no commonly agreed-on curricula, no body "certifying" the schools, and widely varying professional certification requirements (e.g., social worker, rabbi, educator). There is no agreement on what a Jewish professional today should value or what common knowledge, methods, and skills he or she should possess. In the United States, fewer than 25 percent of those professionals working in paid positions belong to the "professional" associations within the Jewish community. There are far fewer of them so affiliated elsewhere throughout the world.

Today, can we speak of a profession of Jewish communal service? Can we agree about the knowledge, values, and skills that must be shared by all who claim to be Jewish communal professionals? I suggest the answer is much more complicated today than 25 years ago because of the changes within Jewish life.

BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE CHANGES

Spectacularly positive developments have occurred during the past quarter-century: the fall of the Berlin Wall between East and West; the unanticipated place of women in the marketplace and Jewish life; the resurgence of Jewish life among a growing core of people in almost every country throughout the world; the geometric growth of intensive Jewish education in many countries; the flourishing resident camp programs in North America; Jewish communities' use of technology; the phenomenal expansion of Jewish art, drama, and music; the growth of Israel as a dynamic economic engine in the high-tech field; the incredible accretion of wealth in some Jewish circles; the rise of the megagivers in shaping the Jewish agenda; the acceptance of Jews in high places throughout the world, including in political circles; the number of Jews outside of Israel who speak Hebrew; the growth of Jewish scholarship; the

growing numbers of those who serve the Jewish community as rabbis, educators, and communal workers; the Jews in Germany as they struggle to become a community; the place and status of Jews in academic and scientific circles worldwide; and the unimagined aliyah to Israel, especially from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia. The list could be longer.

Simultaneously for those of us who feel better in describing ourselves as the "ever-dying people" (Ravidovitch's felicitous phrase), here is a list of negative developments: the growing number of inter-marrieds; the falling Jewish birthrate outside the state of Israel; the complex nature of anti-Semitism and anti-Israel sentiment in some academic and political systems; the growing schisms in Israel and the Jewish world in general, because of unshared visions as to the nature and size of tomorrow's Israel; the growth of violence as a political tool; the aging of Jews throughout the world; the breakdown of a sense of Jewish community, especially in the United States; the changing priorities of philanthropists and the younger generations who seek and support more universalistic causes today; the staggering economic cost of Jewish education and Jewish life in many parts of the world today; the accelerated growth of poverty among Jews; the growing numbers who are not affiliated in a formal sense to Jewish institutions; the lack of Jewish leadership in the mold of those who shaped Jewish life in the first 75 years of the 20th century; the gap between much of world Jewry and Israel, especially among the young generations; the diminution of importance of central Jewish bodies (except as entrance passes to Jewish cemeteries in some communities); and the inability to define who is a Jew in ways that do not create divisions between Jews. This list could also be longer.

THE PROFESSIONAL RESPONSE TO THESE CHANGES

The contours of institutions in Jewish life are changing, just as Jewish life and structure have always changed. For me the issue is the

need for Jewish communal professionals to play a conscious role in helping shape tomorrow's Jews, Judaism, and its institutions. Without this calling as a base for all that follows, there can be nothing approaching a coherent core of expectations.

In many cases the configuration of institutional responses to the developments of the last quarter-century was totally unpredictable. In yet other instances, trends or concerns voiced in the 1970s have come to pass. Major Jewish agencies, such as JDC, the federations, Keren Hayeson, and Chabad, have played often heroic roles in responding to some of the mega-issues: massive waves of immigration and renewing or putting into place appropriate services and institutions to serve Jews in Ethiopia, Eastern Europe, and South America.

And yet, most of the truly innovative responses to the evolving or newly recognized needs and aspirations of Jews have occurred outside organized Jewish community auspices. The proliferation of alternative approaches has been especially visible in North America, as mega-givers have increasingly created services that have had an enormous impact on Jewish life. Birthright Israel and Jewish educational programs under the auspices of the Bronfman, Mandel, Shusterman, Steinhart, and Wexner Foundations, to name a few, have often resulted in tectonic outcomes. Simultaneously, alternatives to the traditional service organizations and institutions have proliferated almost beyond measure. New forms of synagogues, spiritual centers, funding mechanisms and networks, and experimental educational approaches and programs, too many to be described here, have flourished.

In contrast, the organized Jewish community in many instances has tended to be reactive, rather than proactive. As a result, many professionals who began their careers within the organized Jewish community have left those settings to move into the alternative service models. Research has tended to confirm a growing divide in Jewish life between the organized community, which has tended to become ever more bureaucratic, and these alternative models (Belzer, 2005)

We face these challenges: how to reach out to those outside the conventional umbrella(s) of Jewish communal service; how to learn from the creative and innovative among us even as we try to communicate that there is a canon of values, knowledge, and skills that should and could be binding us; and how to identify all who labor at bettering Jewish life and engaging in *Tikkun Olam* in general so that there are icons to inspire us and learn from.

TOWARD BECOMING A PROFESSION

In the quest to identify canon and icons, I begin by reconfirming what I have long believed: Jewish communal service is not a profession. Rather it can only be satisfactorily comprehended by defining the settings and frameworks within which people who call themselves professionals work. Within these settings there are people who fit the definition of a professional by virtue of their education (e.g., rabbis, Jewish educators, and graduates of programs of Jewish communal service). Those with degrees in social work, public administration, business administration, management, psychology, marketing, and the like are professionals in the sense of having been certified in their respective professions through a degree-granting institution and/or a national or international certifying body.

Only when the components of which Ralph writes are accepted can we truly speak of a Jewish communal professional. These components are Jewishness, Jewish knowledge, and management skills (I prefer the term practice skills), including management and these other key attributes: leadership, planning research, educational and community builder (he calls the latter "negotiator of coalition"). All who call themselves Jewish communal professionals must share a core of values, knowledge, and skills.

For Ralph, the mission of the Jewish professional was to assure Jewish survival and guardianship. I would add to these two the enhancement of Jewish continuity. Today, survival is an insufficient goal. Physical sur-

vival without the values and aspirations associated with Jewish teachings shortchanges the professional and the Jewish community. The professional must have a passion in the belly to use every appropriate opportunity to celebrate the Jewish future in all of its creative glory.

In developing Jewish communal service, we should look to other professions for useful models. In the United States those who sell real estate and those who raise funds, for example, define themselves in the context of the services they perform, not their prior education. They agree on what is needed to call themselves "certified realtors" or "certified fundraising personnel." Values, knowledge, and skills appropriate to their selected area of work are identified, agreed on, and codified, and no one can use the patented title the field has chosen without meeting certain requirements.

The social work profession has a ladder approach to certification, and so the National Association of Social Workers has varying levels of requirements for membership. These levels grow out of both the settings in which one works and the level of education and practice experience one has achieved. In many states certification is required; in yet others licensure is a requisite.

The field of health care is an even more pertinent model. Physicians; nurses (vocational and registered); x-ray, ultrasound, CAT scan, and lab technicians; orderlies; administrators; chaplains; and development personnel are all in the field of health care, but no one is expected or capable of mastering more than a sliver of all that the field collectively represents. Yet, the knowledge and skills needed to perform well in each position, all in the pursuit of saving lives and/or easing death, are delineated.

Barbers and hairdressers, plumbers and electricians must be licensed to function legally when using one of these titles. Only in Jewish life can one call oneself a Jewish communal professional and "voila" it becomes a reality.

Why has it been so impossible for us to do

what others have done? Collectively as Jews we do great things; we have much power; affect legislation; promote physical and psychic health and safety; aid in the growth of institutions, hospitals, universities, camps, homes for the aging, centers, counseling centers, synagogues, schools, to name but some – and yet we cannot achieve consensus on what and who we are as a professional collectivity.

The following steps assume that there are colleagues who are or can become committed to the need for evolving a structure and agreed-on components beyond their own settings, agencies, or practice specialties.

1. Ask a small group of professionals representing a cross-section of settings and professional backgrounds to write a code of ethics grounded in Jewish and overarching professional values. This code should spell out in general terms the behaviors and expectations to be subscribed to by those interested in affiliating in a formal way with JCSA.
2. Ask yet another group of representative professionals and academics from the schools and programs of Jewish communal service to identify the specific knowledge and general competencies to be the basis for a curriculum for those who have been working in Jewish settings for five years or less.
3. Establish an Internet chat room in which designated representatives of the professional groups and local affiliates within JCSA can discuss the concept of affiliation, a certification process based on the code of ethics, and the competencies identified in Step 2.
4. Identify icons in communal service in the present and the last century and circulate their names through the JCSA Web site. Challenge people to read about one person no longer alive.
5. Award research stipends to graduate students in Jewish communal schools to encourage the coordinated development over a period of time of more detailed curricular materials that flesh out the

products produced by the various work groups above.

6. Expand the number of teleconferences for professional teaching, inspiration and examination of appropriate research. (Perhaps JDC might help provide funds for such a project.)
7. Initiate a certification process. Jewish organizations should be encouraged to recognize this certificate as the preferred basis for hiring people. Careful and sustained contacts with major agencies on both the lay and professional level would be required to help bring the model to life.

Spend the next decade taking those steps, first in North America if need be, but with a view to repeating the process in all Jewish communities interested in evolving a structure that leads to the certification of Jewish communal workers. All who have been paid professionals in Jewish communal service should be grandfathered in and be eligible to use the certified title developed through this process; for example, certified Jewish professional.

Over the next few years, if we willed it, we could settle on the canon for those who call themselves Jewish communal workers. I call for the World Council of Jewish Communal Service to move from talk to action. Let there be small groups in each country committed to the task of defining the meanings of the words "Jewish," "communal," and "service" and determining the shared values and communal aspirations to be held by professionals. These groups should consider such questions as these in their deliberations: Must the visions and values be solely "religious"? Must they be grounded in the values of democracy, self-determination, individual rights, and communal expectations? What must one know and demonstrate to be able to deal with the problems and potentialities of Jewish and the communities in which they live?

These answers can be generated locally and then nationally and internationally through teleconferencing, e-mail, chat rooms, and the like. Curriculum experts can

be enlisted to provide theoretical frameworks for some official certification process. A beginning was made in 1996-97 when the Wexner Foundation funded a grant to the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. Representatives from American-based programs and schools of Jewish communal service met for a number of sessions over a two-year period. They produced a text (purposefully loose-leaf), *Serving the Jewish Polity* (Bubis et al., 1997), which focused on the development of Jewish political theory and included case materials highlighting issues confronting the Jewish community. The intention was to encourage the use of the materials in all programs and schools, thereby developing one component of a common curriculum. A lack of funding for follow-up monitoring, faculty training, and updating the material prevented as much of a wide-based use of the curriculum as the authors had hoped and intended.

And what about the icons, who give us a sense of past and commitment to furthering their teachings? They are out there among us. Until we all read some of the same literature and mingle with colleagues from all manner of settings, they will remain unrecognized. Only when we codify our history and the roles played over the past century by so many now-forgotten leaders will we have pride in defining and in celebrating ourselves. At the very least, we should publish a book, *Who's Who In World Jewish Communal Service*, once every two decades.

As part of the charge for the next four years, we must find the means to write a history of what our field has accomplished. Only then can the fragmentation among us, which today continues apace, can be arrested.

CONCLUSION

We Jewish communal professionals are the *Klei Kodesh* (holy vessels) of today. We are the modern counterparts to the priest of old – serving Jews and helping connect the Jewish people to their responsibilities while responding to their needs. It remains our task to help frame that which must be valued

today and that which we must know of our past: the teachings and the people who have made our presence possible. We must better clarify why we do what we do and who it is that can best distill and transmit the essence of what we aspire to be and accomplish. Then we can move toward the hope expressed by many of us over the decades: the development of a field of Jewish communal service based on a consensus as to what those who labor on behalf of the Jewish people should value, know, and remember. Thus will our competencies grow along with our pride and sense of self-worth. That would be a great birthday present for Ralph Goldman.

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