

FORUM III

Defining the Community Relations Professional at Century's End

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A 40-year-old Golden Age of American Jewish advocacy/community relations may be coming to a close.

It is not so much that the status of the American Jew is in itself faltering. The average economic position of American Jews remains at least as high as that of any other religious or ethnic group. There are a disproportionate number of Jewish students, teachers, and even presidents at the prestigious Ivy League colleges they could scarcely enter in 1940. General acceptance is measured more accurately by the disproportionate number of identified Jews elected to public office by constituencies who are 95% non-Jewish than by the covert anti-Semites among the skinhead types.

Yet, it was not only the growing status of the American Jews that caused the past 40 years of advocacy to be a Golden Age. Nor was it only the development of a more effective advocacy apparatus. These particular decades of advocacy were so much "easier" because objective conditions largely favored the Jewish community.

Consider this one example. The role of powerful Israel as an ally in helping limit Soviet adventurism coincided with a period in which limiting that adventurism was the grand foreign affairs passion of both the American government and the American people. That not only shaped positive feelings for American support of Israel in the last quarter-century, but even muted some Americans whose hatred for the Soviet Union was greater than their traditional

proclivity for anti-Semitism. Nor did it hurt the fight to secure freedom for Soviet Jews.

However, the favorable circumstances of the past four decades have been altered abruptly by new realities: the end of the Cold War, a new Arab militancy, a change in the nature of American influence in both Europe and the Middle East, and even a change in the role of the American economy on the world scene.

As Jewish advocacy promises to become a more difficult enterprise, and as more of the young Jews entering Jewish communal service seek roles as advocacy professionals, it is an apt time to review the nature of that professionalism.

PROFESSIONALS AND PROFESSIONALISM

Vocational euphemism being one of the major sins of our age, it is not amiss for anyone who provides a service for which payment is made to call him or herself a "professional." Yet, usually, there is a central element of pride in the use of the word. A professional has certain standards of work. Indeed, gifted volunteers often call themselves professionals in order to indicate that they have achieved high standards of work. *Professionalism* refers to the standards that prevail not only among the staff but also within the entire Jewish community relations enterprise.

That enterprise may be in danger of becoming somewhat deprofessionalized, not because of a lowering of working standards among the staff professionals but because the meaning of those standards became somewhat blurred during the easier years of the Golden Age.

What are those standards, the particular

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criteria of pride that distinguish Jewish community relations professionals—and professionalism?

The Mission Understood

Originally, the term “profession” might have best applied to those who took religious vows, who indeed professed a “vocation,” a calling to higher duty. There is a vestigial element of this meaning in the term “professional”: a mission, a doing-of-good for not only a particular constituency but also for the community at large.

The primary and essential Jewish community relations mission is *advocacy for the security of the Jew*—for the ability of the individual Jew to be Jewish without disability and the ability of Jewish institutions to be Jewish without disability, in the United States and elsewhere. It concerns such matters as anti-Semitism, the secure place of the Jew in society, and American support for Israel and for beleaguered Jews in other places. This primary mission is the external aspect of Jewish survival.

In short, the first requisite of Jewish community relations professionals is to be fierce and dedicated advocates for Jewish security. Jewish self-interest is the cornerstone of their professional mission.

One does not have to be a paid professional to be dedicated to that mission. However, there is a particularly professional aspect to understanding the nature of that mission in this time and in this place. In the United States, for example, advocacy for Jewish security mandates an advocacy for certain aspects of pluralistic democracy.

In the United States, advocacy for Jewish security mainly takes place at the common-ground intersection between Jewish security and those aspects of pluralistic democracy. That is the arena in which American Jewish advocacy operates, whether on aid to Israel, support for Soviet Jewry, or on anti-Semitism and domestic security issues.

There is a symbiotic relationship between Jewish security and pluralistic democracy.

Consequently, the Jewish self-interested advocacy for pluralistic democracy in this society becomes, in itself, a derivative but essential function for Jewish community relations. In that respect, the Jewish community and its community relations institution have made significant contributions to American society.

The Jewish community relations enterprise, for example, was at the forefront of the successful effort after World War II to liberalize American laws on immigration in general and on political refugees in particular. We have learned in recent years how central such liberalization is to a healthy democracy. The Jewish community relations enterprise has also been disproportionately influential in public campaigns to strengthen other aspects of American political freedom, such as the constitutional protection of free religious expression and the early legal and legislative action to extirpate some forms of discrimination.

This does not mean that Jewish community relations is synonymous with strengthening all that is good and beautiful about America or that it is synonymous with battling all that is bad and ugly about America. That is a different profession. Nor does it mean implementing all Jewish social values that are good and beautiful. That is also another profession.

Yet, it has meant self-interested advocacy for the symbiotic aspects of American pluralistic democracy, which represent some of the most important and humanistic political values that humankind has developed.

The importance of those values for the United States and for the world is reflected by recent events in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and China and their citizens' expressions of aspiration. According to their own words and the Statues of Liberty that they built in the streets, the United States has been the model of political freedom that gave their people hope and that they desired to imitate. Even when they did not approve of many aspects of American society, its political freedom was the star by which they steered.

There is another derivative function of Jewish community relations that must be considered a professional mission: the active involvement of Jews in the community.

Behind the contemporary debate about "whither-the-American-Jew," this much is certain: a prime requirement for the retention within the community of many, perhaps the bulk of Jews, is to involve them in some communal activity with other Jews.

A number of Jewish institutions are creditably engaged in deliberate communal involvement and development, notably the synagogues, the community centers, and now, increasingly, the federations themselves. Yet, a large number of American Jews not touched or not seriously enough involved by such institutions have an actionable interest in the public affairs issues that are on the community relations agenda. Asked which Jewish-connected issue primarily concerns them, most American Jews identify anti-Semitism, or American support of Israel, or American democratic life in some form. That is the stuff of Jewish community relations.

However, most of those Jews are not actively engaged in those matters, at least not within a Jewish communal context. To put it simply: a *deliberate* community involvement or community development function must be considered a discrete Jewish community relations function.

Nor is there anything quixotic about this function; it is integrally related to the central mission. Effective advocacy for Jewish security, in a democratic society, is built on Jewish *empowerment*—and that empowerment, in a democratic society, is partly built on broad involvement. One of the objectives of the Jewish community relations operation is to bring the leverage of the broad Jewish community to bear on Jewish public affairs issues.

In sum, the central mission is advocacy for Jewish security, here and abroad, and there are two derivative but professionally mandated functions in the natural orbit of

that central mission: (1) advocacy for related aspects of pluralistic democracy and (2) a deliberate program of community involvement.

The understanding of and dedication to mission are the first criteria to distinguish a professional or professionalism in this field. However, two other criteria are the hallmarks of a *professional ability* to help lead the community in the implementation of this mission.

Specialized Knowledge

Professionalism usually implies specialized knowledge of one sort or another. Indeed, the term has traditionally suggested a knowledge so specialized that it requires intensive academic preparation or at least a systematic body of intellectual knowledge.

Some professional bodies of knowledge are, of course, much more intensive and esoteric than others. For the Jewish community relations profession, the pertinent body of academic knowledge is made up of aspects of modern history, Jewish history, political science, and sociology. It is derivative, not esoteric, and only moderately intensive.

However, although it is derivative, it is idiosyncratic in its focus. Systematically, it puts together those aspects of history, political science, and sociology that concern the security of the Jew. And it is an essential body of knowledge. Jewish community relations professionalism is grounded in state-of-the-art knowledge about the history, causes, conditions, and nature of anti-Semitism, of anti-Israelism, of political extremism and other aspects of the democratic process, and of the vagaries of public opinion, whether general or Jewish.

There are, of course, so many variables that the "hard knowledge" on these subjects does not automatically lead to correct conclusions about prevention or remedy. There is much room for judgment. Yet, the uniquely focused community relations

body of knowledge at least provides a sound basis for judgment.

Take, for example, the proposition, that, in this time and place, the phenomenon of the rabid anti-Semite is different from the phenomenon of epidemic anti-Semitic behavior. Both need to be monitored, but they do not have a significant causative relationship or call for the same remedy.

Epidemic anti-Semitism does not result from simply multiplying rabid anti-Semites—who are defined as those who have anti-Semitism at the active forefront of their consciousness, are actively looking for ways to engage in deviant anti-Semitic behavior, and will vote against a candidate just *because* he or she is Jewish, i.e., skinhead types. In contrast, mass anti-Semitic movements, such as that of Father Coughlin in the 1930s, are built on the much larger and probably more dangerous sector of the population that is essentially neutral on anti-Semitism, but can be seduced into an anti-Semitic movement because of other perceived self-interests at a time of crisis.

Or, for another example, take the proposition that American public attitudes toward Israel have always followed American governmental attitudes toward Israel, rather than the reverse. To put it in a way analogous to the dynamic of anti-Semitism, a large sector of the American population is basically neutral about Israel, and is influenced mainly by perceived self-interest, usually through the mechanism of public policy, policy makers, or other authority figures.

There is a mountain of historical evidence and research evidence to support both of these illustrative propositions, although neither of them is the whole truth. Of course, no written tests are given; after time, many professionals absorb the essence of such propositions through their fingertips alone.

Yet, the rather extensive body of hard and pertinent evidence has such important practical implications for advocacy strategies

and skills, and for the exercise of leadership, especially in changing times, that it would be good for a knowledge of that evidence to be part of the professional armament.

A Specialized Body of Experience

There is another pertinent body of knowledge that is informed by generations of recorded and remembered case examples, but is learned largely by direct hands-on experience and in-service training. This is the body of *how-to-do-it* skills, although those skills, to be effective, can never be separated from knowing *why* an action is being taken.

Consider, for example, the skill of answering an unreasonable attack on Israel. Among the general principles of effective argumentation is one that warns against trying to answer every point your antagonist makes—in other words, of letting that antagonist set the ground for the discussion. Instead, *you* set the ground, using the occasion to make your own major points.

In the Jewish advocacy context, it is also important to know which nerves it is important to strike in the audience. Yet, the *skill* to apply both the general knowledge about effective argumentation and the special knowledge about Israel-related argumentation is informed by accumulated experiential knowledge and honed in the *doing*.

It is obviously important to be sensitive, proactively, as well as reactively, to such unreasonable attacks on Israel and therefore to develop effective access to public officials in particular and to the media. To gain such access requires optimally an amalgam of some hard knowledge and skills grounded in accumulated experience and honed in the doing.

In all of this, a clear and dedicated sense of mission remains central, but is not enough.

OTHER NOTES ON PROFESSIONAL ATTRIBUTES

On Professional Leadership

The term "professional" has customarily suggested a certain independence of judgment, a non-cog-in-the-machine character. Yet, the function of the community relations worker also suggests a serving of the democratic will of the Jewish community or at least of the particular constituency that the worker serves. Therefore, because the community relations worker is a repository of the special body of knowledge, experience, and skills that will enable the community relations function and mission to be implemented most effectively, he or she must learn how to exercise leadership without breaching accountability to a given constituency.

This exercise of leadership requires the advocacy worker to assume a prime role as educator within the Jewish community and as a developer of informed lay leadership. The professional leader is most effective not as a policy-making "Rambo," but as a persuasive diplomat, one who recognizes that, at any given point, he or she has much to learn from lay judgment. The ability to perform this critical function, which is partly affected by temperament, is itself grounded in accumulated experiential knowledge and honed in the doing.

On Vocational Parochialism

There are, of course, valuable specialists in the community relations field: legal, legislative, and educational experts. Yet, these specialists are more complete community relations professionals—or, at least, their contributions are greatest to the profession—if they fit their expertise into the broadest understanding of the advocacy mission, i.e., not in the pursuit of only one battle but of enduring Jewish security.

Similarly, there are valuable single-issue community relations organizations, which are of optimal value when their contribu-

tions at least *fit into* the broadest understanding of the Jewish advocacy mission.

A holistic approach also sees Jewish advocacy as part and parcel of the mission of Jewish communal service in general, which is the meaningful survival of the Jewish people. Jewish education, fund raising, social services, and community relations are all part of that overall mission. It is therefore a mandate for professionals and lay leaders who specialize in each of those fields to avoid becoming parochialized, to understand the other specialized aspects of the overall mission, and to mesh with them wherever possible.

On Enlightened Crisis Management

Small-crisis management is the daily stuff of the community relations field. A swastika scrawled on a synagogue by a "fun-loving" adolescent requires, in its way, as serious a level of attention from a professional as setting up a Holocaust education program in the state school curriculum. Crisis management is the "bread and butter" work of community relations that cannot be ignored, but it often does not leave much time or energy for the proactive work that explicitly comprises crisis prevention. This is a standard frustration in the field. And although such crisis management may require a certain kind of generic experience and personal skill, it often does not seem to bear much relation to a specialized body of knowledge or a consciousness of larger mission.

Although it would be frightening to imagine a corps of messianic professionals doggedly contemplating their "larger mission" as they approached each chore and task on their daily rounds, community relations workers who are only involved in cleaning up crises, without an informed sense of the field in which those crises take place, will probably not adequately serve the long-run mission of Jewish advocacy.

What's in the Name

The various titles ascribed to this field—Jewish advocacy, Jewish public affairs, Jewish community relations—reflect different parts of the blind man's elephant. The central *mission* of this field is Jewish advocacy; that is, advocacy for Jewish security. Jewish public affairs is the *arena* in which that external Jewish survival will be largely played out. And the *strategies* that best serve that purpose in the United States tend to be described as Jewish community relations—most notably, the organization and the making of alliances and liaisons necessary for effective Jewish advocacy.

CHANGES IN AND CHALLENGES TO THE PROFESSION

Jewish advocacy—advocacy for Jewish security—is one of the oldest professions in Jewish Diaspora history. However, it has changed character a number of times in the course of that history.

Those changes have taken place not only in response to such radical changes in the conditions of the outside world as were mentioned earlier, e.g., the end of the Cold War, changes in the Middle East, and the change in the U.S. international position abroad and economic position at home. In addition, long-range structural changes have occurred within the American Jewish community itself and within the society with which it interacts, which pose new challenges to the field.

Increased Populism within the Jewish Community

The State of Israel, and of American support of Israel, has properly emerged as a top community relations agenda item. This subject has aroused the interest of many Jews, most of whom have a more active interest and involvement in issues related to Israel than in other advocacy issues. Many of these Jews have not previously

been involved in any part of the whole Jewish community relations enterprise. The challenge has been to bring them into the orbit of that whole enterprise, as activists who understand the strategic principles of Jewish advocacy effectiveness.

The political arena is where American support for Israel is fundamentally played out. Jewish empowerment in that arena cannot effectively depend on the exertion of raw Jewish political power in Washington D.C. on any given day. National Jewish empowerment, for Israel or any other issue, depends critically on a long-term involvement in local and regional community affairs and liaisons. That is how the empowerment system works and how Jews, if they are to be effective, must understand that it works. That understanding has become blurred.

Increased Organizational Fragmentation in Jewish Public Affairs

This fragmentation is partly the result of increased populism in both Jewish and American society. There are a number of new, often single-issue Jewish organizations, only some of which reflect a greater mix of strategic attitudes on Israel. The issues of Soviet Jewry, Ethiopian Jewry, and anti-Semitism have also stimulated organizational proliferation.

Such proliferation is, in itself, not an unhealthy state of affairs. It provides an opportunity for broader community involvement. It is healthy in applying pluralistic thinking and pressures on traditional and "establishment" Jewish public affairs. Heterogeneity need not be a hazard.

However, it can be hazardous to effective Jewish advocacy if there is a failure in the operating network among these heterogeneous organizations. Part of the reason for American Jewry's tragic failure of influence during the 1930s was the palpable absence of such a network. It was a failure that American Jewry determined to remedy with the establishment of such networks as

the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, and over a hundred inclusive local community relations mechanisms—all functionally if not organizationally associated with such special mechanisms as the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee.

Heterogeneity can be hazardous if some individual organizational efforts do not sufficiently take into account the interconnected Jewish advocacy needs in this country. Advocacy for Israel or for Soviet Jewry will be effective to the extent that an overall community relations effort is mounted. American government intervention, for example, was once necessary to alter Soviet policy toward Jewish emigration. That government involvement was made possible by the exercise of a Jewish empowerment developed by basic, long-range, and mainstream community relations activity. One-issue "happenings" were often helpful in gaining attention, and sometimes were required to push a slow-moving establishment, but they were only one piece of the necessary action.

On another level, it is ironic that monolithic institutional pressures have sometimes generated an unfortunate appearance of fragmentation. Since the Israeli incursion of Lebanon, and especially since events associated with the intifada, there has been pressure for the American Jewish community to maintain a homogeneous opinion on every turn of Israeli policy. That has become a less credible position, and there are obvious differences within the mainstream American Jewish community on certain aspects of Israeli policy. Yet, there is virtual *unanimity* within the mainstream American Jewish community on the prime advocacy mission: undiminished American government support for Israel. Sometimes a less-than-credible insistence on homogeneity has reduced the force of the real unanimity that does exist.

Ensuring undiminished government support for Israel challenges the professionalism of both workers and lay leaders

who are clear on their mission and on their community-mending function. That function does not require monolithic positions or exclusively multipurpose organizations, but rather an operating integration of effort and of reflective deliberation. And that indispensable function is currently under stress.

A Less Stable and Less Hospitable American Scene

Changes in American society alter the ways in which Jewish community relations must operate. At one time Jews were often operationally considered as one-third of the American population, along with Protestants and Catholics. In the public arena, our political agenda was considered relatively sacrosanct.

The urban and political scenes have since exploded. Our society is more wildly populist and pluralistic—in part, for good reason. The social problems arena in which we operated so effectively has become more complicated. Old coalitions exist now more in nostalgia than in reality. New and more flexible kinds of alliances and liaisons are in order, but are more difficult to maintain. This is one aspect of the end of the Golden Age of advocacy, requiring a more stringent, if sometimes more innovative, application of basic advocacy missions, knowledge, and skills.

Loss of Presence by the Professional Jewish Community Relations Institution

A trend in recent years has been the movement of Jewish influentials from the formal advocacy enterprise. At one time, they participated in both the federations and in overall community relations agencies. Yet, the necessary growth of federation enterprises has drawn more of these influentials' attention and energies.

Concomitantly, some federations themselves have increased their involvement in community relations matters, especially those relating to Israel and Soviet Jewry,

because of the interest of the Jewish public in those matters. However, federation policy makers have generally not had the opportunity to accumulate the understanding of the overall *community relations* mission nor the specialized knowledge and experience that have been available to professionalized advocacy bodies.

In addition, some of the more glamorous aspects of directly influencing government policy makers on the national level, an important part of the advocacy mission, have tended to draw some influentials away from participation in and understanding of the total advocacy enterprise. Such neglect, if sustained, would eventually and inevitably undermine that national influence.

There has sometimes been the complaint that, from a community relations point of view, the Jewish community has "turned inward." That is an unfortunate phrase. The Jewish community has had to "turn inward" somewhat in order to contemplate its Jewish advocacy and other missions. However, the phenomena described above, although not the fault of any given institution, are signs of the general deprofessionalization of the field.

IN SUM

It is much easier to discuss the issues related to Jewish advocacy than the professional field itself. There is an innate danger that such a discussion will tend to overmystify the field, exaggerate the esoteric aspects of the "profession," and generally propagate the kinds of abstractions that tend to make veteran practitioners a bit uneasy.

Yet, it is time for such a discussion, however flawed. As we approach the new century, there are some signs of deprofessionalization, not mainly of advocacy workers themselves, but of the field. Many advocacy workers have expressed an interest in more discussion about changes in society and the field. Aspiring young advocacy workers want some more explicit guideposts for this coming period.

Therefore, we must not only discuss the critical importance of this field to the Jewish community but also try to clarify the advocacy missions to which we must be dedicated—both worker and lay leader—and the kinds of knowledge and skills that will keep that Jewish advocacy effective.