Jewish Communal Service and the Professional Today and Tomorrow*

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. . . how do we find the opportunities to share the challenge and the romance of our profession and regain the pride that we had in it such a short time ago?

Raising Jewish Consciousness

THE Jewish communal professional at this time in Jewish history is a major actor in the Jewish communities of North America, having a unique opportunity to enrich and reinforce Jewish life. Along with the rabbinate, the communal professional is challenged to remain the conscience and guide of a society whose members often need to remind themselves what it means to be a part of a family, a group and a community.

Today almost everyone engaged in professional communal service affirms, at least in words, the need to enhance and strengthen Jewish identity and commitment and the Jewish family. However, the professional leaders have often failed to take the necessary practical steps of giving the communal workers the tools. Within the profession, the necessary time, money or courses for Jewish education have not been provided those in the field requiring it. (It is worth noting that Centers in Englewood, N.J., Chicago and Philadelphia have designed Jewish enrichment programs for their staffs.) Nor have Jewish educators been provided with the opportunities to learn the personal and group skills needed to work in informal settings and with diverse populations.

The big question really is whether the fine Jewish background and Jewish education and the technical and professional skills possessed by many of our younger professionals can make possible more creative Jewish programming in our agencies. Are the young professionals with this background making enough effort to challenge executives and key leaders in the variety of Jewish agencies in each community toward this end?

Having the background and knowledge of Jewish life and Jewish values, the professional has the responsibility for translating them into creative programs. To do so he/she needs to identify the vehicles within communal institutions and the political processes that can be utilized to accomplish the necessary consciousness-raising among those making policy decisions. To emphasize this point, those in the professions lacking the tools must be equipped and those already having the equipment must use it to nourish Jewish souls and to teach people how to live a Jewish life and raise a Jewish family. The younger professionals must lead the fight for funding and for excellence in staff and programming. My assumption is that there is a lay body out there in the community ready and willing to join the struggle and to provide resources for the thrusts which must be developed. Professionals must be able and willing to lead lay people in this direction. To do less is really to deny the very essence of the profession and one's own Jewish roots.

It is of course well known that substantial numbers in the community have a poor Jewish education and have not

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experienced a strong Jewish home environment. However, we have seen that they are interested in their roots. They are interested in being Jewish, in affiliating and belonging and in experiencing their heritage. Their need is for a Jewish experience of quality. They are sophisticated and psychologically oriented. They represent an enormous challenge to the professional.

Outreach must be made a communal priority if we hope to influence a significant part of the more-than-one-half of the North American Jewish population unaffiliated with Jewish communal life. There are indications that some are unaffiliated simply because they are not familiar with Jewish communal life and don't know how to begin to connect.

Need for Social Consciousness by Jewish Professionals

What else does professional leadership of the Jewish community mean? I am very concerned about the "inward turn" of many Jewish communal workers and their failure to deal with what happens in the general society. Why have they backed off or played it safe, dealing with social problems only when there is anti-Semitism, or participating in social activism only on behalf of Soviet Jewry? I am not negating the value of these activities, but they fill "half-a-glass."

A 1982 study, commissioned by the Conference of Jewish Communal Service and conducted by Professor Jonathan Woocher of Brandeis University, surveyed the approximately 3,000 members of this Conference and analyzed the 750 responses received. The respondents were invited to indicate the most crucial issues that concerned them as Jewish communal workers. Jewish survival, Jewish continuity, and Jewish community were clearly more important to the respondents. Inter-

estingly, general welfare and the welfare of society-at-large lagged far behind as prime concerns. Yet, I believe that the responsibility of Jewish communal workers to the minority they serve is fulfilled only by a concern for the well-being of the entire society.

During the 1960's and early 70's, it was assumed we could and should influence the larger system of which we are a part. Indeed we tried. Many of us joined in the fight for civil rightsmarched in Southern cities, participated in lobbying efforts, advocated aid to education and housing for the poor, and "fought" in the "War on Poverty." We took stands within our professional organizations on these and other issues. Back then, many of our professional bodies, like the Association of Jewish Center Workers, had active social action and public affairs committees. Today, they do not—and I'm very frightened of what it means.

Somehow, something happened and so much that had always been valued in Jewish communal circles slipped away. It is possible to identify several causes for this turn of history: the deterioration of understanding between Jews and other minority groups; the legitimate emphasis over the last decade or more on the monumental threats to Israel; the often incorrect perception of widening gaps between the needs of Jews and the rest of our society; and finally, perhaps, a growing conservative trend in the general population which has influenced some of our laymen. I sometimes wonder too whether the communal professionals have identified too closely with the value systems of some of the more conservative lay leaders.

How do Jewish communal workers recapture their ideals and sense of obligation to the larger society?

The Reagan administration has caused anxiety among Jews over church-

state issues and guns versus human services. Despite a growing conservatism among Jews, a majority of them voted for Walter Mondale. President Reagan has kept his pre-election promises. He has been a good friend to Israel. On the domestic front, with minor exceptions, he is doing exactly what he told us he would do. He said he would tighten and even rescind social programs-and he has. He said he would cut back aid to education—and he did. He promised to limit social service entitlements—and he did and promises to do more. There have also been cutbacks in school programs, such as lunches, vocational training and cultural activities. He helped bring religion back into the public schools and he is in favor of limiting options for women in their quest for self-determination. President Reagan is really a revolutionary; he is striving to destroy 50 years of social progress.

Coalitions of Jews and Others

Poverty, illness and family fragility are problems of Jews and non-Jews. We must build coalitions with others—Blacks, Orientals and Hispanics—to help deal with these problems. We have a stake in bettering the conditions of all people. It makes sense economically, politically, morally and ethically.

We Jews have a history of compassion and social justice. We understand what it is to suffer, to be persecuted and humiliated, to want a better life for our children. In terms of enlightened self-interest, Jews have learned from history the need to stabilize society, to solve the problems of the underclass. We are witnessing in America today the precipitous rise of violent groups on the right and the left.

Therefore, the Jewish communal worker must guide the Jewish community in the direction of coalitionbuilding. We must seek out the responsible leaders of the other minority groups. We must differentiate between leaders who care for their people and the democracy we live in and bigots and demagogues like Louis Farrakhan.

The most obvious symptom of the spiritual disease of our civilization is the feeling among people that they have lost control of their destinies. I feel some sense of control can be regained if Jewish communal professionals become aggressive advocates of positive action and use their skills to engage the lay leadership. They will also need to help those affected (such as the elderly) raise their voices in protest.

Use of Public Funding

The communal profession is necessarily directly involved with resources and services in the public domain here in America. Jewish communal workers have stengthened their ability to deliver important services buttressed by necessary governmental funding and creative use of it. The downside of government funding is that criteria and standards for service delivery and evaluation have been established by governmental funding sources and do not always classify as highest priorities for the Jewish community. For instance, in New York, in the Wilder v. Bernstein case, which has been well publicized, the proposal has been that admission criteria to Jewish and Catholic residential treatment centers be established by the City, omitting preference for religious affiliation. Similarly, there is a major demand to utilize those extensive nursing home facilities under Jewish auspices on a "first come-first served" basis. In both cases, the prevailing argument is based on the premise that since Federal, State and City funds are provided for most recipients of services, preference based on religious affiliation must be disallowed. What an opportunity this provides the profession for creating engagement between top lay leadership and government!

If we are to fulfill our charge of service to the Jewish community, we must identify and address the unmet needs and problems within our Jewish and general communities. Among these problems are:

- 1. The ever-increasing cost of financing adequate health care, especially for the elderly.
- 2. The likelihood that the value of social security pensions will have been severely eroded by inflation by the time of retirement.
- 3. The lack of quality and reasonably priced child care services.
- 4. The economic factors that lead to unemployment.
- 5. The rising cost of education.
- The paucity of adequate rental housing stock for those who cannot afford to own homes, condominiums, or cooperative apartments.
- 7. The work patterns, which often require long hours, separation from the family and moves from one city to another. Also, the frequent need for job retraining in an environment where technology changes with explosive speed.

These problems affect Jewish communal workers as citizens and professionals. Those working in the private sector cannot deal with the solutions to these problems without interfacing with the public sector. They are partners with the government whether they like it or not and they must participate in the process with intelligence and responsibility.

Responsibility to Lay Leaders

I am suggesting that Jewish communal professionals must think about and speak out on issues and must educate lay leaders so that they understand what the Jewish community has at stake in the domestic, political and economic arena. What do tax cuts mean in terms of benefits to the vulnerable in society? What choices and tradeoffs are we making for the money saved? Is it worth depriving children of their breakfasts or old people of their weekend meals?

I am concerned about the growing pattern of Jewish communal professionals making statements about "where the community is," and "what our lay leaders are willing to deal with." I feel that there is a growing reluctance on the part of professionals to place a full measure of trust in the basic committee and board processes. Experience has suggested that lay bodies, as a collective, will frequently take positions on major policy issues that might be avantgarde for them as individuals. It is the group process that seems to bring out the best instincts in leadership and in this context to take an advanced social position. The tendency today to "protect" our lay leadership is really denying them the full respect they deserve as leaders, having the capacity to come to conclusions that will benefit the community. I am suggesting that engagement is the order of the day. In our agenda-building, in our securing the decision of the moment, we may be denying our laymen the absolute joy of grappling with an issue, doing the necessary soul-searching and struggling for answers. There are vital issues that a board of directors must examine, then determine options, and finally make the necessary decisions for the Jewish community. It's out of this kind of engagement that board members learn what the services of their agencies can mean in the lives of people.

The Jewish communal professional's freedom in speaking out on human service issues will convey to the laity of the community the dignity and responsibility of the profession.

Another one of my concerns is the quality of the people who are entering the professional field and general recruiting efforts. We need to attract the brightest and best to our profession. I know that in New York, I have yet to effectuate a program in which Federation and other agencies are able to reach out successfully to the summer camping staffs. A major cultivation job has to be done with youngsters in their senior year of high school and their first year of college. We must find the means for identifying leadership youngsters, and providing them with undergraduate scholarships, including summer work experiences, and experience in Israel, and then help them on to the appropriate graduate school. Nothing less than this will suffice. The basic message of our work is not sufficiently conveyed.

Every community will require a task force of key lay people who can play an effective role in the recruitment of young people. We did a questionnaire and study of our lay leadership in New York and found that the lay leadership tended to look more positively on their children entering Jewish communal work than did the professionals. The whole question of self-image, of a sense of self-worth, is very important. We must look at what we do within our own agency operations to elevate and give meaning and dignity to the role of the professional.

Executive Ethics

That brings me to some very sensitive issues which affect our profession and ourselves—the question of personal and professional ethics and morality. It has been said that ethics require that power not be abused, advantage not be exploited and opportunity to help, to serve, and to assist not be lost. In the course of a professional lifetime, one is confronted by

many situations and dilemmas posing ethical problems. More is expected of the Jewish communal workers than of the man in the street. The former deliver life-giving services to the community and the ways in which they perform and behave should serve as models.

Jewish communal professionals have functions that endow them with power, advantage and opportunity in interacting with others. Jewish communal workers have enormous latitude in terms of behavior and frequently are not under the scrutiny of either lay or professional superiors. Such circumstances require one to make a clear choice as to who one is and how one ought to act.

In their professional work, they constantly must make decisions and choices on how to deport themselves. Executives become models not only for their staff but also for the laymen with whom they engage and with whom they participate in the governance of their agencies.

I can list some situations being constantly confronted and pose the question as to what messages professional behavior in these situations sends out to the community.

Frequently lay leaders call upon the agency or Federation executive to assist them or their families with hospital admissions, camp jobs for children, admission to homes for the aged for relatives and for general protectzia above and beyond the usual service norm of the agency. In these situations, if an executive calls another agency executive or one of his/her own staff and intervenes on behalf of the lay person, is the executive sending signals in the ordering of values and whom it is important to accommodate and please?

With lay people who serve in the governance of our agencies, the role of a Jewish communal professional is not primarily one to meet their personal needs, but we do need to be cognizant of the necessity for gratifications from volunteer experience. The laymen with whom the professional shares planning and makes decisions are the same people who will make determinations on the professional's salary and job security. Does this not influence the professional to act in his/ her own individual interest by recruiting a lay leader who "won't cause trouble" rather than one who is best for the agency enterprise? Do professionals sometimes have a tendency to overuse certain people and diminish the opportunities for other people to participate in the communal enterprise? Does an over-use of a layman, with whom the professional feels secure or satisfied, send signals to other laymen who have their own ambitions or desires to serve? We may all have witnessed situations in which a compliant layman was in the service of an executive or department head rather than the agency mission.

Every Jewish communal professional grapples in some way with the question of the degree to which socializing with laymen may help in meeting his own and/or his family's social needs. One of the dilemmas for the professional is how to have a personal life that has some distance or removal from the agency milieu. What price is paid by spouse and children when the prime social outlet is with the laity with whom we work! I only touch this complex problem with a brief brushstroke.

Executives frequently have financial and benefit arrangements in their own employment contract that are substantially different from or superior to those of their executive associates. What rule of thumb or factors should be at play in extending certain of the executive prerogatives to other management staff in the agency setting?

Additional ethical dilemmas for the communal professional will sometimes inhere in the freedom in confronting key lay leadership about the latter's behavior which may appear to be inappropriate. The lay leader's behavior may take the form of public criticism of a staff member or in general, acting in a way that detracts from the meaning or from the dignity of a particular Jewish communal enterprise. The executive's role at such a time and how he may engage with the layman will have a significant influence on other staff people in how they interact with laymen.

How does an agency deal with its various business contracts? Are competitive bids secured or is business automatically given to key lay leadership? These behaviors, too, carry a large message to the community.

There are still far too few opportunities in communal work for women. There is still a shameful lack of female executives in agencies and federations. And we still hear the old familiar refrains about why women themselves elect not to be available for promotions, for positions that require moving to other cities, and so forth. There are answers to those questions that will come easily enough once we commit ourselves to the use and not the misuse of this very valuable human resource.

On a line-staff level, there are a number of ethical dilemmas or problem situations that are encountered. Some examples are:

The staff member who responds to the irate client by abdicating his own responsibility and removing himself from any identification with the agency by failing to make some attempt to resolve the problem.

The problem of the client in an agency who requires special support and effort and extension of the professional self in empathy. In many instances these clients are powerless and helpless people.

In Conclusion

Finally, how do we find the opportunities to share the challenge and the romance of our profession and regain the pride that we had in it such a short time ago? We must do things of which we are proud and we must share that pride.

Altruistic activities must be made as visible and enticing as possible. Certain patterns in the Jewish community support the current expression in American life of selfishness and the pursuit of self-gratification. We often flaunt affluence and place things above the person. Yet, Jews are looking for meaning in their private and professional lives. We have been told that it is this very search which has led some to join cults

and missionary groups.

People need a warm and caring environment. Agencies are more than vehicles for service—they are instruments for Jewish linkage. People need services they can trust: they need life goals, standards and guidelines that matter. Well-planned Jewish community services are a powerful force against the disorganization we are seeing and experiencing.

My personal experience of thirty-five years in Jewish communal work has really been a "roll." My father worked at the Jewish settlement house in Pittsburgh for forty years and my daughters together have had six full-time years in communal service. It has been our life and it has been a real romance.

Twenty-Five Years Ago in this Journal

Inherent in the situation I have tried to describe there seems to me to be a basic dilemma in the life of American Judaism. On the one hand, the projection of the rabbi as the sole religious representative of Judaism tends to reinforce both inwardly and outwardly a trend to a clericalism and ecclesiasticism which appears to me to be alien to Judaism. This appears to be one of the symptoms of the rabbinate's response to loss of authority, and one of the symptoms also of a creeping Christianization of American Judaism. To be true to authentic Judaism, the rabbi would wish to participate in projecting and interpreting the concept of a lay religious community of Jews and Judaism, of a "goy kodosh," a holy people. And, it is altogether likely that the American rabbinate would be content to do this, if there were favorable conditions for it.

However, and this is the other horn of the dilemma, the rabbi functions in a Jewish community where Jewish ignorance, and an absence of religious dedi-

cation, are the prevailing norm for the layman, and, as I said earlier, the profession of Jewish community relations is not altogether exempt from this verdict. A rabbi's collaboration in the attempt to project to the non-Jew the image of a lay religious community of Judaism would be in some measure collaboration in the projection of an embarrassing fiction. Thus the rabbi sees himself forced to take on this surrogate role of the carrier of Judaism and comes to accept it as a natural role. This also fits into the rabbinate's need for finding new sources of authority for himself. So far has this process gone in some cases, that when they do on occasion come across laymen-volunteers or professional community relations workers-who have extensive Jewish knowledge and deep personal involvement in the life of Judaism, some of the rabbis are startled and act in an uncomfortable and threatened fashion. . . .

Isaac Seligsen Fall, 1960