

## Fresh Jewish Dimensions in Inter-Group Relations\*

DAVID I. SARNAT

*Director of Community Relations and Urban Affairs,  
Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland, Ohio*

AS I looked over some of the early records of the Community Relations Committee in Cleveland, I was reminded of the fact that the community relations field is relatively young. In 1906 the American Jewish Committee was founded in order to "prevent infraction of civil and religious rights for Jews in any part of the world and to secure equality of economic, social, and educational opportunities through education and civic action." In 1913 the Anti-Defamation League was founded with the expressed purpose of "protecting the Jews from the effects of bigotry and discrimination and to secure for them equal rights and opportunities." These stated goals outlined the functioning of early community relations efforts, efforts aimed at defending the rights of Jews and combating anti-Semitism.

In the late 30's and early 40's a new era of programming was developed, and this is best depicted by the terms "The Climate of Opinion" and "Intercultural Education." Those were the days of "Brotherhood Week" and "Take A Jew to Lunch"—of dialogue with our Christian friends. We reached out to the non-Jewish community to explain who we are and to demonstrate that there were no real differences between Jews and non-Jews and stressed the common "Judeo-Christian heritage."

The 1950's mark the next stage of development which is best depicted by the terms "legislation" and "social action." My perusal of the records of the Community Relations Committee of Cleveland indicated heavy involvement in the development of fair employment practice laws in the State of Ohio and the eventual setting up of a fair employment practice commission. To me, this vividly illustrated the activity being duplicated across the country at that time.

At the end of the 1950's and the beginning of the 60's we saw a massive push for civil rights with social action and legislation as the major tools. Major national Jewish organizations and individual communities with their Federations and CRC's were deeply involved in this effort to secure civil rights legislation and changes of practices as they related to America's racial minorities.

The early programs of defense, intercultural activity, social action and legislation are the traditional concerns and are still with us. Therefore, they do not constitute the "Fresh Jewish Dimensions."

My contention is that the immediate backdrop for the field comes from the reaction to the 60's. A decade depicted by its initial push for civil rights and the later civil disorder and polarization. Within ten short years, the early feelings of brotherhood and good will came to a screeching halt.

Compounding the domestic turmoil, the Jewish community experienced the

---

\* Presented at the Intermediate Cities Executives' Institute, Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, Fontana, Wisconsin, August 2, 1972.

Six-Day War in 1967, Israel and the world Jewish community alone in victory. It goes without saying that this had a profound effect on us in all of its aspects.

The two major currents—civil disorder and the Six-Day War—have caused the Jewish community to move in the following manner:

### 1. *Backing Away*

Many of us have backed away from the broader issues and concerns of social justice, civil liberties, equal opportunity because of the problems of the latter 60's and the domestic problems that we are now faced with. Those Jews who at one time were in the forefront of the civil rights struggle are no longer there. Many national Jewish community relations organizations which devoted much of their agendas to this issue have swung completely around and are preoccupied with playing the "defense agency" role.

### 2. *Inward Direction*

As previously stated, the Six-Day War has had great impact on many aspects of the organized community ranging from fund-raising to Jewish education to community relations. In the community relations' field, the Six-Day War and the reaction of the non-Jewish world shattered some early-held beliefs that through dialogue and interaction we will be able to "gain friends and influence people." The Six-Day War with the silence of our non-Jewish friends has caused many to re-think our relationship with the non-Jewish community. It demonstrated to some that efforts aimed at bringing our Christian friends to a point of understanding around one of the central issues to American Judaism—Israel—is all for naught. In the last analysis they feel Israel's strongest ally is Diaspora Jewry, and leading the way is the American Jewish community.

### 3. *Quest for Jewish Issues*

These gifts of the Six-Day War and domestic unrest have caused some to begin an ardent search for "Jewish issues." To some our involvement now in community relations must be limited to those areas where we can demonstrate their inherent Jewishness. Much of this quest for Jewish issues is positive; however, I sometimes get the distinct feeling that rather than being a positive movement into programming around our identity, our culture, and our history, it is a fleeing from those issues that have been so difficult to deal with. It is a way we escape the reality of previous failure.

The result of the pulling away from the broader social goals and the quest for things Jewish has placed the Jewish community on an isolationist course. Some no longer feel that we can depend upon traditional non-Jewish allies. They feel that we can only do for ourselves, that we no longer can depend on others, that of prime concern to the Jewish community are those things Jewish and purely Jewish. All of our good friends in 1967 were unable to come to our aid so why should we bother with them now?

The pulling away from broader issues, the heightened quest for Jewish issues, and the resultant Jewish isolationism are impediments to the development of adequate CRC programming and in many ways interfere with the development of a Jewish perspective. In order to overcome these obstacles and develop a truly "Fresh Jewish Dimension" I am suggesting the application of four questions. These, when applied to specific issues, may serve as guidelines for activity.

They are:

1. Can the Jewish community make a difference if it undertakes activity aimed at the broader goal?

2. What of our constituency? Is there any real possibility of carrying them with us in broadened controversial directions or are we going to be by ourselves?

3. Is there anything really Jewish about the program? Is this not a situation where we should operate not as distinctive Jewish citizens but as part of the overall community?

4. Do we have the competence, the energy, or the wisdom to mount a really effective program in any of these areas?

The test of these guidelines is directly related to their application to current issues. The areas of greatest need for our involvement are:

1. *Israel and Soviet Jewry* — These are the issues with the greatest internal consensus. Our responsibility lies in interpretation to the general community.

2. *Public Welfare* — This is a dollars and cents issue. We have real concerns with the programs affecting aid to the aged, medical assistance, aid to Jewish poor. We must interpret this to our communities.

3. *Civil Liberties* — It is still valid to state that the Jewish community is endangered when there is any denial of freedom within the range of civil liberties concerns. Currently the stress is on affirmative action programming in educational institutions and employment.

4. *Changing Urban Environment* — The shifting Jewish population which leaves small, isolated groupings in inner city or detached areas calls for new strategies and methods.

All five of the above issues meet the previously outlined criteria as follows:

1. Can the Jewish community make a difference if it undertakes activity aimed at the broader goals?

It goes without saying that in the areas of Israel and Soviet Jewry, if the

Jewish community cannot make a difference, who can? However, we must be careful in programming around these issues that we do not limit ourselves to programming within our community, but that we continue to reach out to the non-Jewish community.

The Soviet Jewry Issue affords us an opportunity to involve elements in the non-Jewish community that would not necessarily be able to relate to Israel. I specifically cite the attraction of some of the liberal Protestant churches and the Eastern European ethnic communities.

With the other issues—public welfare, civil liberties, and urban change—we also can make a difference because of who we are. The Jewish community, being predominantly middle-class, with some degree of political sophistication, usually is listened to in the urban centers. Social change requires that there be those in the community making noise to attract the community's attention to a problem and those who can open the doors to the power structure. We are all aware of the noise-makers who have in many cases successfully attracted attention to certain issues. We can serve as the door-openers.

2. What of our constituencies? Can we bring them with us?

This is a crucial question. Without the support of our constituency we are nothing. In the area of Israel and Soviet Jewry we have no problem other than being accused of not doing enough.

The other issues offer a problem that I think can be solved through a good job of interpretation aimed at proving the self-interest of the Jewish community around a given issue.

All Federation executives are well aware of what the costs are to the Jewish community due to the inadequacies in the public welfare system. As an example,

the ups and downs of Medicare have great effect on our subventions to homes for the aged and hospitals. It is obvious self-interest on our part that public welfare be more equitable, and this message must be gotten to our constituencies.

3. Is there anything really Jewish about the program?

In trying to define an issue as Jewish or not, one must be careful not to be overly restrictive in our definition, nor overly generous. If we wind up with a too restrictive or too liberal interpretation, then the call to Jewish issues is one that either becomes an excuse for inactivity or a rationale for involvement with issues which do not belong on CRC agendas.

The Jewishness of Israel and Soviet Jewry is again obvious. This obviousness can be used to demonstrate a rationale for involvement in other issues. As Sidney Vincent stated in his most recent address before the NJCRAC Plenum, "Is our concern with preserving Israel or insisting on the right of Soviet Jews to emigrate inward looking or outward looking? It is, of course, both. We're fighting simultaneously for Jewish rights and human values." This message must be gotten to our constituencies—that our cry for human rights as related to our specific concerns must be consistently followed domestically.

4. Do we have the competence, the energy, or the wisdom to mount a really effective program in any of these areas?

We are able to find wherewithal when it comes to Israel and Soviet Jewry and there is no reason why we cannot do the same with the other issues. Professionals in Federations which represent systems of social agencies, should have the competency to deal with these human concerns. If anybody can understand the area of human needs, we can. And, there-

fore, we have an obligation to interpret this to our community.

A note of caution in the area of civil liberties is indicated. Currently, the Jewish community is increasingly becoming involved in affirmative action, on issues of preferential treatment, quotas, and the like. We are all well aware of the problems that have erupted on this score in New York City—aware of the conflict and the potential for misunderstanding. Part of this is due to the fact that we as an organized community have not clearly defined our position. We vacillate, we are vague and unclear when it comes to specifics. This causes many difficulties and forces us to define "what is good for the Jews" on the merits of a specific case or incident. We then jump from case to case many times exhibiting grave inconsistencies. At times we are in opposition to the use of a census in determining compliance as it relates to racial minority hiring, but at other times we insist on its usage in reference to religious minorities. In developing our position in this area we must go beyond individual cases and must keep in mind the long-term effects of any given position. We must keep in mind community relations—our relationship with others.

We must be able to develop principled positions that are relevant to our local communities. Because the New York area has one-half of American Jewry, there is a natural tendency for it to dictate the flavor of the community relations field. As an example, there are major discussions taking place concerning affirmative action and specifically the establishment of quotas to provide greater opportunities for certain minority groups. The situation in New York is one in which the Black community and the Jewish community have "buted heads" over this issue. However, one must keep in mind that what happens in New York City does not necessarily

happen in Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, San Diego, or Denver and that we in our local communities must evaluate our own position independently of what may be happening in New York. Adoption of programs and policies based upon New York's experience may have little relevance to the needs of our local communities.

### Examples

I shall present just a few examples of how we in Cleveland have dealt with some of these problems. I cite these not out of a pride of authorship, since in most cases I was not the author, but rather as an attempt to present tangible particulars.

*Ongoing Contact with Decision Makers:* We cannot consistently expect support in the general community unless we have a program of ongoing contact with the key decision-makers in the community. In Cleveland we have matched our leadership with non-Jewish colleagues with whom they assume a responsibility to keep informed on specific issues. The staff provides the Jewish leadership with educational material on an ongoing basis and this is passed on. Recently, in planning for a newspaper ad around Soviet Jewry we were able to call on our person-to-person program to get influential citizens to sign. Only because we had maintained ongoing contacts with these individuals and because they were already sensitive to the issues were we able to quickly achieve our goals.

*Community Interpretation:* If we have any desire to bring our community with us, then we must begin working with them so that they can understand the goals that we have set in these program areas. We also need the feedback from them so that we may judge whether we are on the right track or not, whether we

are meeting the needs of our constituency that we say we are serving.

In Cleveland we have designed an "open doors" program to meet this need. Its format is as follows: We organize in the home of a member of the Jewish community a small gathering of five to six couples who are friends of the host family. We supply them with a speaker-moderator. This individual takes the first ten minutes to briefly run through the areas of activity that the CRC is currently involved in. The rest of the evening is spent around discussion of these areas plus others which may be of concern to the participants. They receive information and hopefully gain some understanding—we receive valuable feedback and many times important information. Response to this program has been exciting, and we have reached people who have never before had contact with the organized Jewish community.

### Summary

In summation, I would like to stress three themes that I feel constitute the "Fresh Jewish Dimension." They are:

1. *Our self-interest* — We have an obligation in CRC planning and programming to re-interpret traditional concerns in a manner which emphasizes the Jewish self-interest. This has to be done in real terms—not moralistic statements based on some obscure Biblical tract.

2. *Pitfalls of isolation* — It is not sufficient to program solely for the Jewish community but we must constantly make attempts to involve the general community. At all costs we must avoid slipping into an isolationist orientation which would leave us alone and powerless.

3. *Principles and Perspectives* — It is not sufficient to judge an issue by the merits of a particular case. We must incorporate the long view with the im-

## JOURNAL OF JEWISH COMMUNAL SERVICE

mediate needs of a particular incident. We must remain cognizant of community relations at all times and develop principles which provide us with a solid base of operation.

These three themes will help us cope with our inheritance of the last decade. It will help us to avoid the pitfalls of a mad rush to things Jewish, and at the same time allow us to be Jewish.