

Jewish Psychosocial Identity of Youth; A Programmatic Approach*

ANITA WEINSTEIN, *Outreach Worker*

and

BERT J. GOLDBERG, *Coordinator*

College-Age Youth Services of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, Illinois

KENNETH KENISTON, Paul Goodman, Theodore Roszack and Jerry Farber are among the most recent voices discussing youth in contemporary society.¹ Perhaps Farber was the most controversial in his "radical" but candid description of the confrontation of the student and adult society:

What on earth are we trying to teach? . . . The scariest thing about a classroom is that it acts as a sort of psychological switch. You walk into a classroom, some things switch on in you and others switch off. All sorts of weird unreal things start to happen. Any teacher who has tried simply to be real in a classroom knows what I'm talking about. This is so hard to express . . . You walk in and everyone's face is a mask.²

Themes running through the literature include alienation, lack of control over one's culture and society, the need for a community of closeness, the need to relate to people rather than objects, and the need to determine who or what the "self" is. Students become increasingly aware

* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Services, Philadelphia, May 29, 1973.

¹ Kenneth Keniston, *The Uncommitted: Alienated Youth in American Society* (New York: Delta Books, 1969); Paul Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd, Problems of Youth in the Organized Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960); Theodore Roszack, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1969); Jerry Farber, *The Student As Nigger*, (New York: Pocket Books, 1970).

² *Ibid.* Farber, p. 25.

of the differences between what textbook psychology says they "ought to be," and where they feel they really are.

The purpose of this article is to present a statement on the life tasks of the college-aged young adult through a synthesis of the available literature; to present some speculations about the process of "Jewish identification" and "identity formation" in students, and to present some pertinent data collected in evaluating a "Shabbat Community" program which was developed during the program year 1972-1973 by College-Age Youth Services of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago.

The Literature

Marc Triebwasser does an excellent job of paralleling the university and societal crises of the 70's, with those of youth in the Jewish community. His article briefly describes the Jewish campus activism of the early 70's, and its developmental history, and provides us with clues to its personal significance. Triebwasser writes, "the young Jews participating in these groups saw their commitment to Judaism and its humanitarian value *within the context of their total life-styles*.³ . . . The Movement that has evolved from these beginnings has been at its core a search

³ Marc Triebwasser, "The Crisis in Jewish Youth Leadership," *News and Views*, (1972), p. 12.

for life-styles, value systems, and institutional forms which will allow its participants to live more freely and more fully as Jews and therefore as human beings."⁴ Triebwasser explains that while the Jewish activist groups grew up around political and societal issues, in the years since Kent State, political activity has diminished, while the needs of students have shifted and increased in intensity. To borrow a phrase from the women's movement, the personal is the political.

The tragedy is that the lack of fulfillment of the potential of the years right after 1967 has created perhaps an even deeper sense of resignation than would have existed if the potential wasn't created in the first place. The need now is to go out among our youth and try to help them meet their own personal needs and find their own personal directions. The trend is away from seeking institutional change and toward seeking personal change.⁵

The literature in psychology is rich in its impressions of the time period known as young adulthood. In the psychoanalytic literature the period of college-age is seen as the time in which the gains of all the developmental tasks of childhood are consolidated. The individual is emerging as an autonomous being who has achieved some sense of competency in work and task areas; the major task of this period being the stabilization of self esteem.

Another important characteristic of late adolescence (young adulthood) is the delineation of those concerns which really matter in life, which do not tolerate compromise nor postponement. These concerns do not always serve an obvious self-interest, since they often result in frustration, struggle, and pain, but regardless of the consequences, the young adult adheres to certain choices which he feels at the time, are the only avenues to his self-realization.⁶

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 13

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 19

⁶ Peter Blos, *On Adolescence, A Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, Inc., 1962), p. 128.

Perhaps the single most crucial issue in the psychological and Judaic literature on youth is the concept of identity formation. Eric Erikson in addressing "identity":

As far as I know Freud used it only once in a more than incidental way and then with a psychosocial connotation. It was when he tried to formulate his link to the Jewish people that he spoke of an "inner identity" which was not based on race or religion, but on a common readiness to live in opposition and on a common freedom from prejudices which narrows the use of the intellect. Here, the term identity points to an individual's link with the unique values, fostered by a unique history, of his people. Yet it also relates to the cornerstone of this individual's unique development . . . It is this identity of something in the individual's core with an essential aspect of a group's inner coherence which is under consideration here: for the young individual must learn to be most himself where he means most to others — those others, to be sure, who have come to mean most to him. The term identity expresses such a mutual relation that it connotes both a persistent sameness with oneself . . . and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others.⁷

In achieving a sense of identity one must begin to subordinate childhood identifications to those of adulthood. Aspects of this "new identification," are sociability, a sense of intimacy, competitiveness, and an ability to engage in decision-making. Identity for the young adult becomes, then, a psychosocial phenomenon involving both the internal and external worlds and realities. However, as Triebwasser has described, the external reality is often complex and discouraging.

Ideologically, there are many Americans, and conflict among them is traditional. In childhood, these conflicting currents deeply imprint themselves on the developing psychic structure, but the child's overt concern and ability to comprehend do not extend beyond

⁷ Eric Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: International Universities Press, 1959), p. 101.

egocentric life space of self, family, and a few playmates . . .⁸

In young adulthood, one is confronted with identity choices in a complex society, including career choices, religious choices, Zionist choices, and role choice of "head," "Activist," "intellectual," and so on. "The psychosocial stage of youth, midway between adolescence and the fixed adult roles of spouse, parent, and worker, is a phase of 'disengagement,' a moment between the past and future when many have the clearest vision of what men actually are, not what they say they are."⁹

In summary then, the tasks of this period include development of autonomy, competency and self-esteem, inner identity formation, and a more global identification with one's culture and society.

Program Development

Given the above knowledge of the psychosocial struggles of youth, it becomes the task of the program worker to provide a service system which will enable students to confront and formulate their own "Jewish psychosocial identity." The "Shabbat Community" was conceived as a program vehicle to help the students deal with these issues. Working with a core group of commuter students, the following format was developed: a) Shabbat dinner (prepared by staff at first, but with increasing student involvement and experimentation); b) ritual observance; c) oneg festivities—including song, dance, or an occasional speaker; d) group discussion focusing on maintenance issues involving the community on a here-and-now level. During the first evening together, the group found it necessary to

deal with several issues. Most of the participants had little or no knowledge of the ritual prayers or melodies. Instead of a desire for learning, or an openness to become involved in the ritual, the workers found themselves facing a group of "weird masks," similar to those which Jerry Farber reports finding in his classroom. The feelings the workers found were not of "alienation," or "emptiness," or even "guilt." The workers found themselves facing people who were ashamed of their lack of ritual knowledge.

Helen Merrill Lynd, in *On Shame and the Search for Identity*,¹⁰ discusses the nature of shame. She likens the experiencing of shame to that of exposing and wounding. In a transcultural society, an awareness and knowledge of values which exist inside and outside of one's society and culture is crucial.

It is no accident that experiences of shame are called 'self-consciousness.' Such experiences are characteristically painful. They are usually taken as something to be hidden, dodged, covered up — even, or especially, from oneself. Shame interrupts any questioning, unaware sense of oneself. But it is possible that experiences of shame if confronted full in the face may throw an unexpected light on who one is and point the way toward who one may become. Fully faced, shame may become not primarily something to be covered, but a positive experience of revelation.¹¹

In program, the workers engaged the students in tutorial sessions before dinner, to learn the blessings. The people gradually took responsibility for researching Shabbat and halachic issues in observing Shabbat. Program needed developing, observance and kashrut needed interpreting, membership wanted to control who attended and participated. Though

⁸ Robert Liebert, *Radical and Militant Youth* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), p. 224.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 225

¹⁰ Helen Merrill Lynd, *On Shame and the Search for Identity*, (New York: Science Editions, Inc., 1961).

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 20

the desire to accept responsibility for community maintenance grew more noticeable, the skills necessary to assume the decision-making responsibilities, or even engaging with the workers in such decision-making processes, appeared to be much of a risk. In the 12th session the individuals within the group were beginning to express a collective identification. About 19 of the students emerged as the community, with a core group of 7 serving as the stabilizers and catalysts of the group.

In this phase of development, the group began to encounter inter-personal risking and sharing. The accomplishment of the ability to begin to express feelings provokes new feelings and fears in the members. A sensing of a Jewish communal identity became evident in the discussion which followed the oneg festivities, but a lack of knowledge and a sense of shame were still present. In attempting to examine where the shame grew from, and how the students received these feelings in light of their Jewish-psychosocial identity formation, staff developed a structural interview which was designed to help staff and students sort out the developmental tasks of young adults. It was hoped that we would find in this instrument further clues to personal needs, as well as feedback on program development.

The Interview and the Interview Form

The interview form was composed of four sections, each designed with specific objectives in mind.¹² It was administered in a one-to-one interview, using the open-ended question technique. The first section was designed to capture the interviewee's earliest Jewish recollections as well as obtaining remembrances of Shabbat and holiday celebration in the

home. Questions were also asked about the individual's formal Jewish education, experiences in Jewish youth activities and career interests and goals. Although not included on the interview sheet, synagogue affiliations of the family and synagogue affiliation of the person were also explored.

The second section of the form attempted to assess the skills the interviewees felt were needed to help one actively participate in Jewish life. The interviewees were also asked if they felt they possessed the skills they had previously identified as necessary and how they felt about their skill levels and what skills they felt need further developing.

In the third section, the Shabbat Community itself was focused on. Three major aspects were identified and explored. First, the aspects of the program which the student felt had been significant Jewishly. Secondly, it explored how the student felt in the social atmosphere of the Community. That is, how he or she felt doing "Jewish things" in a coed, social environment, often involving strangers. Finally, the student was asked to evaluate her or his role in dealing with Community maintenance issues, including program development, problem-solving, cooking and menu planning, kashrut and halachic issues.

The final stage of investigation explored areas for future growth of the Community, techniques for incorporating Jewish living skills into future program and attempted to ascertain the students' feelings and reactions to the interview.

Results

Ten members of the Shabbat Community were interviewed, including the entire "core committee" and several "active" others. The interview results are summarized below:

¹² See appendix pp. 73-74.

Part I—Histories

Eight of the people interviewed were commuter students, while 2 were non-students. There were one freshman, 2 sophomores, 3 juniors, one senior; 2 have graduated and one is of college-age, but a non-student. Eight of the youth live at home with their families, one lives alone and one shares an apartment with three friends.

Two of the interviewees had no formal Jewish education, while 8 had been bar or bat mitzvah. Four have been involved in Jewish youth movements and 6 have studied Judaica in college. Two students plan to be teachers, one a physician, one hopes to go into business and 6 are undecided.

Considerable confusion among the students as to the role they hope the synagogue will play in their adult lives is evident. Six were brought up in "conservative" homes and 2 in "reform" families, while 2 grew up in homes in which Judaism played no "daily part" in their lives. Of this group, 3 plan to attend synagogue, while 7 feel smaller groups, such as the Shabbat Community, which celebrates holidays, would be more meaningful.

Part II—Jewish Living Skills

Eight of the students saw their families as having the most influence on their Jewish identity. Indeed, many discussed the significance of their earliest childhood recollections of Judaism in their homes. Nine hope that they can create a Jewish family unit to carry on the traditions and culture of Judaism. Eight felt that a knowledge of ritual and tradition were essential living skills, however only 4 felt secure in their own knowledge. Six felt their knowledge was inadequate and expressed a desire to learn.

All felt that observance of ritual, traditions and holidays are an essential part

of Judaism, yet only 3 felt comfortable with their present level of ritual observance, and 4 felt secure in their level of holiday observance.

Five of the people had been to Israel at least once, while all felt the survival of Israel to be important to Jewish life. All felt that knowledge of Hebrew is important and 9 plan further study in Hebrew. Three felt that knowledge of Jewish history and struggle was crucial to developing one's Jewish identity and felt it should be added to the survey.

Part III—The Community

Four of the students were active in College-Age Youth Services programming and the College-Age Youth Services Lay Advisory Committee. Three had become active through staff encouragement, 3 had learned of the program through publicity and had remained active through staff encouragement. The most popular Community programs had been one on Jewish History and one focusing on the concept of the Messianic Age. Also ranked highly were discussions about program and the feelings of people in the program.

The members expressed concern when asked questions about group membership and status. Seven found it difficult to meet people and reach out to others. Three felt "ok" about meeting people, especially if they already had a friend in the Community. All of those interviewed said that they felt self-conscious the first several times they participated in the Community, especially during dinner and the blessings.

The group expressed differences also in assessing their own roles in issues of Community participation and maintenance. Three felt they were active in program development, 4 felt they participated in decision-making, 2 in problem-solving and one in membership recruitment. In all of the above areas staff were

perceived as having assumed major responsibility. Five of the group felt active in menu planning and preparation, with little staff involvement.

Part IV—Conclusions

In concluding the interview, the people were asked to assess what they hoped the Community would become. All expressed the desire to have the group open and attractive to new members. The students also felt that the sections of the interview which dealt with Jewish living skills and program involvement were the most meaningful.

Conclusions

The Shabbat Community did attract students very much like those described in the literature. The people had the same "needs" for closeness, a group identity, that Erikson discusses. The group discovered that they lacked the skills, both Jewishly and interpersonally, to accomplish these goals on their own. They then began to engage with the workers, in building program around these skill areas. The program had meaning for the people because they were the ones who were assuming responsibility for the program, at least to increasingly greater extents, which Mark Triebwasser theorized was desperately needed. He might have called it the personal touch program. One student stated, "Here (the Shabbat Community), the people make the program."

Reaching the point however, where the group could open up and begin to assume program or interpersonal responsibility, was an arduous task for both the group and workers. A turning point did not come until the workers began to confront the group's lack of skills. Once that step had been taken the group became involved in learning and growing in various interpersonal and Jewish areas. Where previously they were ashamed of

their lack of knowledge, through discussion and direction and a shared invested interest by group members, the shame was confronted and growth was experienced by the members. This portion of the program was consistently rated as the most popular by the students.

To rate one's growth in psychosocial identity is an unrealistic task for such a program group. However, one can speculate and draw inferences from the data obtained. Erikson stated that identity formation includes such areas as sociability, a sense of intimacy, and an ability to engage in decision-makings. Certainly the Shabbat Community program structure attempted to encourage increasing participation in these areas. The data would tend to indicate that, while people's relationship skills did improve, the majority continue to have difficulty in this area. Perhaps a more direct approach to the area of interpersonal relationships is called for. Since only 4 people felt they played an active role in the decision-making process and felt comfortable doing so, it appears clear that the staff needs to help the group get more involved in making decisions and in learning the necessary decision-making skills. As a result of the interview itself the group has begun to voice a desire to deal with the interpersonal aspects of group life.

The interview was helpful in allowing each member to examine his or her own skills, and assess his own participation in program. If used properly, an interview can provide workers and clients with a necessary and useful tool for program assessment and interpersonal development. The worker can collect data and begin to focus on trends and issues in the group's development.

It appears clear that the Shabbat Community has been helpful as a program vehicle designed to help students confront and struggle with their Jewish psychoso-

cial identities. It also seems evident that, for the future, the contract between the group and staff needs to be more clearly verbalized. If it is accurate that those people attracted to a program of this type lack both relationship skills and knowledge of ritual and tradition, then the fact that the Community will address these issues needs to be made clear.

Finally, the question of membership needs to be addressed. The group itself felt only minimal investment in the growth and development of the Community. Either the members lacked the skills needed to expand the membership or, more likely, they saw staff as being responsible for this phase of Community life.

Indeed, as the group plans for the future, the staff must confront the issues of membership and help the group continue to increase their role in helping the Community live and grow.

College-Age Youth Services Shabbat Community demonstrates the viability of the theoretical formulations about young adults. It also shows that program can be designed in an attempt to meet these needs. With this basis it is incumbent on the college worker to be clear and comfortable with the theoretical underpinnings of his/her work and to look carefully at programming in order to design programs that are both theoretically and programmatically sound.

Appendix

JEWISH IDENTIFICATION INTERVIEW

Part I

Name _____ Age _____ Campus _____

Home Address _____ Year in School _____

School Address _____ Phone _____

Jewish Education and related background _____

Post High School Jewish Studies _____

Do these classes meet on your campus? _____

Career Aspirations _____

Part II

1. What are the Jewish living tasks or skills needed to exist as a Jew? Please assess your own strengths and weakness in these task areas.

Knowledge of	Living Skill (?)	Your Own Skill
ritual	_____	average superior need to learn
tradition	_____	average superior need to learn
holiday customs	_____	average superior need to learn
ceremonial skills	_____	average superior need to learn
observance of		
ritual	_____	average superior need to learn
prayer	_____	average superior need to learn
holidays	_____	average superior need to learn
conversational Hebrew	_____	average superior want to learn
Hebrew study (textual)	_____	average superior want to learn
Others: (list)		
_____	_____	
_____	_____	
_____	_____	

2. How did you first become interested in the Shabbat Community?
3. Of the programs we have developed, which have been the most significant for you?
4. How and why have these been significant? (Purpose here is to distinguish social from intellectual pursuits if they can be differentiated.)

Part III

1. How do you feel about the Shabbat Community? Who in the Community do you feel the closest to, and which people do you feel comfortable with?
2. Does the fact that people are from differing campuses affect your participation in the program in any way?
3. How do you feel about meeting new people? Is there any difference in meeting new guys or girls?
4. Does the Shabbat or religious focus of the program make it easier or more difficult to meet people?
5. Is the Community a conducive place for creating or experiencing new "Jewish" ideas or programs?
6. What are the tasks or responsibilities involved in maintaining the Community, and what role do you take in contributing to them?

	Your Role	
program development _____	active	passive
decision making (for example around observance issues) _____	active	passive
problem solving _____	active	passive
membership recruitment _____	active	passive
menu planning and cooking _____	active	passive
other _____		

Part IV

1. What would you like the Shabbat Community to be?
2. How can we incorporate learning new Jewish living skills with our Shabbat Community program?
3. Have any of the questions helped you with any aspects of your own growth and questioning?