

The Role of the Center as it Pertains to the Quality of Jewish Life*

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MY interpretation of the subject of this title is that it invites an examination of Center roles that would lead us to the *future improvement* of quality. But Dinerman's paper¹ has dealt essentially with a restatement of the things we have been doing, past and present. He has not detailed the dream that must impel us forward as a movement, tomorrow. He has primarily spoken of that which *is*, and has barely alluded to what ought to be worked at in Centers in order to effect improvements tomorrow. I do hope that AJCW through its Committee on the Quality of Jewish Life will hammer out our *future* guidelines.

Dinerman's mention of the purposes of the Center is certainly relevant. But to quote him:

The purpose of the Center is to fulfill its purposes. They are: as an agency of the Jewish community, to serve and enhance the quality of the lives of Jews, Jewishly and as individuals; to encourage Jews to care about other Jews; and the perpetuation and strengthening of the Jewish community of America.

There is something circuitous about Dinerman's formulation of purpose, which does not lead us anywhere.

He has my thanks for reminding me of the complexity of the whole subject of philosophical purposes. Purposes are truly the underpinning, the *raison d'être*, the guide, goal and direction of our whole effort in Centers. How we relate ourselves

to goals is another matter of great complexity.

It is probably timely to remind AJCW and Dinerman that the Association had attempted to examine philosophy and roles of our movement through its Commission on Center Purposes some ten years ago. A re-examination of the subject and the updating of the Commission's work are in order today, because of our growing concern about the quality of our life and the improvements the Center might make in it.

Each one of the power groups making up the Center's constituency has its own special perceptions of our purposes. Are they compatible with each other?

—Is Dinerman's statement representative of board attitudes across the country?

—Is it representative of the attitudes of staff?

—Are Center purposes perceived by members in much the same terms as stated in the presentation?

—What about the attitudes of the lay and professional leadership of Federations?

As was attempted on one or two occasions in the last ten years, the researchers in our work would do well to restudy some of these questions. With the appropriate data at hand we may be able to gauge the true extent of our commitment to the improvement of the quality of Jewish living, and retool accordingly.

It is Dinerman's lack of focus on the Center's priorities that I miss. It is the

* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Philadelphia, May 27, 1973.

¹ Harold Dinerman, this issue, p. 13.

same kind of problem that one finds repeatedly in many otherwise excellent analytical presentations. When I think of the breadth of the subject of Jewish life itself, I find myself begging for a stronger delineation of its scope. I beg for a focus on priorities, because of the fact that I find it so difficult to relate to huge globalities. Dinerman's paper implies a conclusion that the quality of Jewish life is enhanced because the Center is good for Jews as individuals, as a community, and as a people. The generalization is easy to accept. The priorities are more difficult to define, however. As life grows more complex, the highlighting of priorities grows increasingly mandatory.

Dinerman has properly reminded us that the center of gravity of the Jewish community has been shifting from the city to the suburbs and even beyond. He has commendably also underscored our responsibility to the remnants of Jews, mostly aged, who are seemingly abandoned to live a life of isolation in the old former Jewish neighborhoods. But there is an additional aspect to this problem that behooves us to focus on, and remain interested in, the City.

American and Jewish life together will be impoverished culturally and spiritually to the degree that urban civilization in general will disintegrate. The City is the repository of the significant cultural institutions of America — great libraries, orchestras, theaters, schools, universities, concert halls, museums, parks, recreational outlets, Seminaries, and venerable synagogues. A disintegrating city will bear witness to the frightening demise of American and Jewish civilization.

The physical, economic and emotional environments of the city dweller are today in serious decay. No one can doubt the effect of such disintegration on the cultural quality of our life. No matter where we live as Jews, the decay of our

cities will affect the centers of culture that have taken America 300 years to create, and that have taken its Jews 100 years to establish here as their own unique expression.

I commend Dinerman's suggestion that the Center's role is to guard against vulgar materialism and tastelessness; note the symbolic reference to Las Vegas.

There is a potential social action role that merits expanding upon: the Center's role in combatting the desecration of Jewish dignity. Cannot the Center play a role in keeping the organized Jewish community alert to the vulgarisms of entertainers who make cheap fun at the expense of: the Jewish mother, Jewish holidays, customs, foods, and institutions, just to mention a few features.² The Quality of Jewish Life needs protection from the form of entertainment that makes comedy at the expense of much that is precious to the Jewish heritage.

I wish to take note of the absence of any reference to the plastic, graphic, literary, and performing arts of the Jewish community. Except for the Center, there are few institutions in the organized Jewish community that are concerned about the state of such forms of artistic expression.*

I commend Dinerman's statement that the key concern of the Center is the enhancement of the Jewishness of Jews. If that is our institutional purpose then it follows that the professionals who work therein need a body of knowledge that will equip them to achieve what Dinerman expects of them, "to continually experiment with varied approaches that will attract and encourage Jews voluntarily to wish to enhance their Jewish

* Editor's Note: Dr. Urbont's brief commentary on the cultural arts has been cut from this discussion, and the reader is instead referred to his article on the subject in this issue, p. 75.

knowledge and communal identification." However, this confronts us with an old dilemma, and our field has still found no formal solution to the problem. At a JWB conference in 1959, which was concerned with Jewish values, Judah Shapiro said:

The obstacle is the failure on the part of too many in the American Jewish Community to *know*. In a paper — I made reference to one of the most brilliant philosophical analyses of knowledge by John McMurray, an English Protestant philosopher.

John McMurray points out that too many people don't realize that you cannot think about anything you don't know. Too many people have come to the conclusion that if they think about something, then they will know. You cannot think about what you don't know. I am frank and blunt to throw before you the challenge: how much do you know in order to think through the problem of Jewish

values? How much have you read? How much have you studied? How knowledgeable are you?²

Our future vision of the necessary improvements which our Centers can effect must arise from professional *imagination, honesty, and passion*. These are the qualities personified by prophetic leaders. Sidney Monas in his comments on a book published recently said:

"Prophecy is not prediction. At least the quality of a prophet does not ultimately depend on the accuracy of his predictions, but rather on the power and authenticity of his vision."³

² "Jewish Values and Jewish Community Center Programming". Proceedings of Conference. JWB, Jewish Community Center Division, New York, October 28, 1959, p. 12.

³ Sidney Monas: "Commentary: Amalrik's Vision of the End"; in Andrei Amalrik, *Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?* Harper & Row, New York, p. 90.