## The Center Executive and the Problems of Leadership in a Society in Transition

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THE rise in Jewish affluence and entrenchment in the middle-class Establishment has restricted the functioning of Jewish Center executive personnel, both as agents of change and as skilled human relations specialists, whose talents are sorely needed in today's crucial times. In fact, it is my belief that an inverse ratio exists to this extent: the more affluent the Jewish community becomes, the less it will move towards participation in active change, thus also restricting the movement of the executive personnel towards social change and action.

Center boards which are actively involved in vital decision-making processes of the Jewish Center are generally made up of well-established businessmen or professionals of the community. Their stake in the Establishment or status quo is solidified, and like much of the Jewish community they represent, they are very sensitive to how they are viewed by the non-Jewish Establishment.

Instead of the rise in affluence making the Jewish community center boards and membership more secure in their beliefs and action, it has made them more sensitive to keeping within safe bounds and upholding the Establishment norms of the general middle-class community. With the decrease in anti-Semitism and the near-equality of the Jew in all spheres of community activity, a number of top Jewish leaders have been recruited by community social and cultural institutions to serve in leadership positions. The additional involvement further mires the Jewish leader in

the Establishment and further restricts any action which will invite the disfavor of his non-Jewish colleagues. It is with these very same leaders that the Jewish executive must function. Their own restrictiveness, in a sense, makes the executive more wary in his relationship to them. One restriction feeds on the other amid the shared feeling that one must not rock a boat which is giving everyone a good trip.

The Jew, becoming firmly established in the middle-class apparatus, has also been brushed with the middle-class affliction decidedly marked by "inaction," unless forced to act because of the lack of any other alternative. Today's society is one in transition and a number of its institutions are being tested in the urban crisis and by the changing values and prejudices of a large part of its populace. In spite of the obvious urgency of the present-day crisis, middle-class action and involvement are yet to be felt.

Jewish prejudices exist, and they are no different from the middle-class prejudices against the Negro or the lowerclass in general. The fear of intermarriage with white Christians is strong enough. One can imagine the consternation and fear of Jewish parents who contemplate Negro-Jewish interaction and its effect on inter-marriage. fact that there has been a sizeable increase in infants born out of wedlock between Negro males and Jewish females gives substance to that fear. The liberal Jewish youth of today may not be as subject to color prejudice as his parents. The fact that a substantial number of the "hippies" in the Haight-Ashbury section of San Francisco were Jewish is another strong indication of the Jewish youth's break from the accepted norms.

To compound the problem, Jewish secularism has increased, as evidenced by the concern of many of our Rabbis who see their congregations immersed in the materialistic values which often suffocate the humanitarianism which marked the Jew of the 1940's and 50's. If traditional Jewish values are disappearing and secularism is gaining, then what is there left for the Jewish youth of today which will give him a sense of values and tradition?

The quickening of today's work-tempo has also affected an appreciable number of our Jewish people, who are members of professions or businesses. It takes a high toll in energy and mental application and adds to the high tensions of living in an already over-charged society, beset by personal conflicts, confusion of values and other ills.

So much for a background picture of the environment of our Jewish community. Our Center membership and board members in this milieu are more able to live within this unholy context by the fact that the majority are materially successful. This material success is at the most a palliative and hollow. Though its true emptiness is masked, it emerges in many areas of social behavior.

These influences are a part of the social context and working environment of the Jewish Center worker, whether the executive or practitioner. It is in contrast that one recalls the milieu of the Jewish Center worker in the 1940's and early fifties when the Jewish community was still struggling for affluence and recognition. This was a Jewish Center era which had more or less a sense of mission, and the professional

Center worker's determination to help mold and shape the social context and values of his membership gave him satisfaction and stimulated a greater idealism. There was a strong feeling that his work counted and his effort meant a better functioning of the individual as a citizen and Jew. This was also an era which focused on the individual and his human worth. Today, the fast acceleration and tempo of our society and the numerous demands of Center operation have added to the depersonalization of the Jewish Center's function.

The picture is continuously changing for the executive and program person-"Tell it the way it is" becomes more difficult for the "way it is" indicates the social disorganization among our institutions, as well as the deterioration of values which is taking place. If little means anything, then why make an effort toward meaning? How many Centers are willing to face a realistic examination of the social milieu and of the often materialistic lives which our membership lead? Today our membership is not so much concerned with the meaningful contents of their lives as with the materialistic well-being of themselves and their children. They are occupied with securing the future. The tragic part of this attitude is the overbalance of materialistic values as against the humanistic values which are really the indices of a sturdy foundation for the good life of the future. One needs to make a good living, but one needs to learn to live well too. It is this area which must be given more focus and attention in the Jewish Center.

The fact that Jewish life has become segmented has not helped the Jewish Center achieve greater depth. Programs of Jewish content, religious and cultural, are usually tacitly understood to be the domain of the synagogues and temples. The social and recreational aspects of

Jewish community life have been relegated to the Center. True, there are a number of Jewish-oriented programs in the Center, but they lack a continuity and an over-all strength which can identify the agency as a "Jewish" agency, and most of these programs do not have the content which will make a lasting contribution to the individual's life as a Jew.

For the Jewish Center board member -and so many of the Center Boards are homogeneous both in thought as well as economic well-being-the Center life has become a round of struggling with budgets, fund-raising affairs and additions of brick and mortar. These being indices of success. These aims are often set by the Center's top lay leaders, and, at times, survival of both the executive and the agency necessitates the use of the same standards of success. We know that it takes money to give services, that it requires adequate facilities, staff, and so forth. We also know that it takes a great deal of manpower and priority of effort to obtain these finances, and as a result other areas of work suffer.

To compound the encircling restrictions, there has been a change in the status of the executives and other top personnel in the Jewish Center field. The executives, by dint of the upward movement of their salaries and the rise of large Jewish Center complexes (quite different from many of the make-shift arrangements in the late 30's and forties, and even early fifties) have moved into the middle-class echelons, and have often taken on many of the middle-class values important to the continuation of the status quo. It is not unusual to hear the executives discuss their latest stocks or real estate acquisitions. This is quite different from the after-work coffee sessions of the early forties on changing and bettering society for all. The radicals of yesterday's youth have become the conservatives of today's middle-age.

Not helping matters is the fact that many of today's executives have come from working class or lower-middle class families, and some still carry the scars of the depression. Their status is newly gained and memories of the past struggles have not added to their security. As a result, the stimulation and motivation for change have diminished, or are at best related to the vested interest of the executive. As often as not, the executive, as well as other Jewish Center staff, is highly vulnerable to the whims of various power elites of the board or of the general Jewish community. This, too, has further restricted his movement outside the accepted norms of the Establishment.

In the past, before his advancement, the executive had little to lose by taking stands on controversial social action and social issues. He was mobile and did not have the materialistic well-being of today, so he had much less to lose. Today, a mortgage on a house, children in college and financial investments have made him a link in the forged chain of middle-class status quo. Although his head is status quo orientated, remnants of his crusading past and taste for action still occasionally move his heart.

Perhaps this is the way of age and is a natural process of life. However, as social workers who have a commitment to the development of the human being, we need to analyze further the process which has taken place within the Establishment and the price today's top echelon Jewish Center worker is demanded to pay for his status and acceptance in the Establishment. It is the price of muting his dissent in a society which cries out for change and action by dynamic and knowledgeable leaders. How can one tell his commu-

nity that it needs to cast off its prejudices, give youth more freedom and take up the cudgel for the many poverty-stricken families in today's America? Of course, the Executive can act and marshall others to act on today's crucial problems, but one must pay a price—and that price may very well be non-acceptance by the Establishment, and often censure by his clientele, who control his livelihood.

The tragedy is that today's bleeding society cries out for knowledgeable and trained leadership. The Jewish Center worker, whose very training is in the social dynamics of societal movement and development, is thus literally taken out of contention by the many ties which he, himself, has with the Establishment.

In addition the nature of his work has undergone a number of radical changes which further underlines the "executive image" and diminishes the "humanitarian image". Concern with buildings, budgets, endowments, fundraising, has changed today's executive image from "humanitarian-orientated" to a "technician-orientated" functioning. Sanford Solender in a recent paper 1 has clarified the problem to some extent when he suggests that many of the roles presently carried by the executive and social work staff can very well be taken over by specialists who can free today's Center worker so that he can use his social work skills in other areas. However, I believe that his projections are mainly functional or operationally orientated and he fails to emphasize achievements in social directions which implementation of his ideas would make possible.

The refinement of top Jewish Center worker's functions will take strong effort and dedication as well as re-alignment of personnel functions in many of our Jewish Centers. Perhaps this realignment will also once again put values in their proper perspective. The top agency personnel will not be administrative technicians, but skilled practitioners in human dynamics related not only to the Jewish community but also to the general community. This modification of or refinement function may also force many of the Jewish Center boards to reshuffle their own values, especially influenced by the top Executive now taking the role of actor in human dynamics and social change, rather than being embedded in the numerous minutiae of running an agency.

This modification of function, too, may steer Jewish Center executives to focus on the change process and its effect on membership, as well as the general community. Hopefully, too, it would enable him to widen his sphere of functioning and help set up structures to move the Center clientele in the area of creative living and the social change which is such an important factor affecting one's ability to function well. must be underlined that we, as members of the Jewish community, do not live in a vacuum, but in a living, breathing society which is part and parcel of our every-day lives. This does not mean that we diminish our Jewish strivings and Jewish survival concept, but merely that we give it more depth and more room to develop by creating a healthy environment which will reduce impediments towards that survival.

Morris Levin catches the spirit when he states, "We will need to relate the significances of the race riots of today to our survival as Jewish people. We will need to relate our survival as a Jewish people to the major social issues

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Sanford Solender, "New Prospectives in Staff Organization in the Jewish Community Center Field," this *Journal*, Vol. XLIV, No. 4 (1968), pp. 299-309.

of which we are a part: the problems of automation, of anonymity, of bureaucracy and so on. Creative survival would mean an inter-actional process in all phases of life. It is our willingness for our Jewish tradition to inter-act with our American citizenship that will provide the answer to creative survival." 2 Also. the National Jewish Welfare Board Study Committee's recent formulations point to the need of vital change in the functioning of the National Jewish Welfare Board.3 High on its list of priorities are: "Assisting in the solution of problems of personal and social adjustment" . . . "Reinforcing and improving family relationships" . . . "Contributing to the improvement of society through education and social action." If some of these objectives are to be implemented by the Jewish Centers, it is quite obvious that we cannot do business as usual and a number of structures and programming focuses will need change.

What has happened in a number of agencies is that the demands and pressures of services have been of such a nature that much of the energy and personnel have been enmeshed in the mechanics of providing these service needs. In addition, the shortage of staff has placed an additional burden on the Jewish Centers. Naturally enough, these demands are basically for social and recreational services. The Jewish Centers have provided these services and have functioned well in providing them in spite of difficulties. The gym, skill classes and summer programs, give good evidence of success. Jewish programs of an intellectual and cultural nature have also increased, perhaps not at the rate of other services, but amply enough to satisfy some of the Center membership.

Missing are the human relations and social change factors. Being members of the general community, our Jewish membership is beset by the same confusions which plague the general community and society in general. We, as Jewish Center workers, have been limited in this crucial area, because becoming actively engaged would involve a painful reassessment of ourselves and the Establishment, its values and norms. It would also involve a reorganization of function, especially that of the executive.

Why would it not be possible to have a Human Relations and Social Dynamics Division in some of our larger Jewish Centers with a basic function of focusing on the social and dysfunctional problems which we know are besetting so many of our members as well as the general community? The Jewish Center is not an ivory tower and our membership is part of society which is facing a crisis of large proportion today. The need to communicate, to learn to live as Jews and as citizens of a larger whole, to live life creatively with a concern for justice and human values has become more evident than ever. Our Centers will not be able to function to their best capability unless we give these problems deserved priority.

Modifying the function of top personnel in our Jewish Center will help. A Human Relations and Social Dynamics Division would be additional support. And, of course, the executive function can be geared more to the "change factors" and to providing strong leadership which would stimulate the questioning of a number of the moldy values held by the Establishment. This would also further accentuate the process towards a healthy and creative clientele and dynamic institutions worthy of a new age.

<sup>2</sup> Morris Levin, "Social Change and the Jewish Center," this *Journal*, XLIII, No. 4 (1966), pp. 317-28.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> National Jewish Welfare Board Study Committee, Objectives and Emphasis of JWB's Jewish Community Center Services for the Next Decade—April 1, 1968.