

NATIONAL PROGRAMS FOR JEWISH COMMITMENT, KNOWLEDGE AND CULTURE *

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It is important to examine, sensitively, all aspects of national programs for Jewish commitment, knowledge and culture. This requires a look at the unmet needs in this field; the content of national programs and their relationship to local activities; a consideration of the areas requiring clarification of needed approaches and responsibilities; and an appraisal of trends, directions and priorities.

What is particularly necessary is a clear view of the background against which this matter must be dealt with. The Jewish setting for this discussion is characterized by a profound anomaly. The American Jewish community is affluent, secure, and enjoying the constantly increasing benefits of an open society. Yet this has been accompanied by accelerated acculturation and declining vitality in the identification and participation of most Jews. All of this has led to fear concerning the Jewish future.

The concerns about the Jewish setting today take several forms:

1. Anxiety about the deterioration of the Jewish identification of young people of older high school and college years. There is a cessation

of organized Jewish participation by this age group following Bar Mitzvah or confirmation and a strong implication of the obsolescence of many of the patterns and practices of Jewish education and youth programs and youth-serving organizations.

On the college campus, Jewish young people evince a decreasing interest in Jewish life. The open campus society and its challenging intellectual climate contribute to this. The impact of Jewishly disoriented faculty upon Jewish students accentuates the problem. There is absent a feeling of the relevance of the Jewish heritage to contemporary intellectual and academic concerns and a failure to relate the social action interests of many college youth to Jewish values.

2. Among American Jews generally there is a critical lack of Jewish knowledge and significant Jewish participation. There is, in fact, a condition which may well be described as Jewish illiteracy.
3. The alienation of Jewish intellectuals from Jewish life is particularly important in view of the growing role of the intellectual in American life.
4. There is a decline in the quality

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of Jewish family life: in the Jewish influence of the family. This is affected by the mobility of family members, the early projection of children out of the immediate family circle, the decline in the influence within the family of an older generation with a rich Jewish personal experience, and the increasing dysfunction in the Jewish family.

5. Formal Jewish affiliation seems to be of diminishing significance. While many are technically affiliated with temples, synagogues and other organizations, there is minimal involvement in programs and activities. Though large numbers of Jews have formal religious affiliations, most participate minimally in the religious programs of their congregations. Organizational programs emphasize non-Jewish elements and often are poor in quality.
6. The shortage of qualified Jewish professional workers plagues Jewish communal life generally and seriously handicaps the development of more effective Jewish communal services.
7. The paucity of Jewishly knowledgeable and committed lay leaders likewise restrains the progress of affirmative Jewish communal efforts.

In balancing this picture, it is important to emphasize that American Jewry is not without its assets. There is a strong desire on the part of most Jews today to maintain their Jewish identification. What we are experiencing is not a rejection of Jewishness, but a shrugging acknowledgement of it without appreciation of its meaning as a factor in contemporary living. Our assets include varied Jewish communal and institutional resources: agencies and organizations fulfilling many dif-

ferent purposes and having trained personnel, fine facilities and impressive finances. Moreover, we have made considerable progress in our capacity to function as an organized Jewish community in meeting our needs.

The challenge to Jewish leadership today is to use these resources and assets with daring and creativity to cope with the deteriorating and negative forces which are at work in Jewish life.

The overriding orientation with which this situation must be met is that isolated, discrete organizational programs are no longer appropriate. They must be supplanted by a new recognition of common concerns and new patterns of joint effort.

There must be a compelling awareness of the close interrelation of all the elements in an effective program to counter the weakening of the vitality of Jewish life. This relatedness is horizontal in that it cuts across all kinds of programs: formal education, group services, cultural work and the like. It is vertical in that it covers the age span, including children, youth, college students, young adults, adults and older people. Home, synagogue, school, Center, Jewish organization, Jewish community organization, all are closely related elements in meeting the contemporary problem.

A program of action to deal with this situation must consist of a number of components. These are as follows:

1. Formal Jewish education must undergo fundamental reconstruction. It must be focussed on all ages and can no longer be child-centered. There must be attention to enriching content, strengthening methods, utilizing modern educational materials, providing effective facilities and resources, and assuring the financial support.
2. There must be recognition of the vital part played by group services

and informal education in this task. Jewish community centers and Ys, resident camps, day camps, and organizational youth programs must be viewed as integral to this effort and their work must be expanded and strengthened.

Both formal education and group services must have a new orientation. The relevance of Jewish material to present day life must be emphasized. There must be attention to developing excitement, vitality and commitment about participation in Jewishness. The response to the doubts and challenges of youth must be nondefensive and there must be flexibility as to the alternative avenues for the expression of Jewish commitment. Programs must be geared to the intellectually sophisticated level of today's population, with a particular focus on college youth. There must be creativity in expressing the relationship of American Jewry to Israel and to world Jewry.

3. A new emphasis is required for Jewish cultural experience in America. This necessitates full recognition of the cultural arts as a vehicle for giving expression to Jewish life today. It requires the cultivation of these arts both from the point of view of new creativity and from the aspect of participation in programs based upon the arts.
4. New dimensions of concern for the advancement of Jewish scholarship are needed. Chairs of Judaic studies must receive continuing impetus and support. We must be concerned with the training of scholars in Jewish areas and with the appropriate dissemination of their work.
5. There must be a more intensive and unified approach to research

in Jewish life today. In the face of the resources of American Jewry today, it is hardly tenable that our research efforts are so sporadic, unplanned, discrete and uncoordinated. What is needed is a broad-based, integrated research effort to secure social and demographic information about Jews, to explore sociological and historical phenomena affecting the American Jew, to inventory Jewish needs and resources, and to evaluate programs and services. The time has come for the organization of an overall national institute on Jewish research which brings together the manifold efforts now finding expression in the field of Jewish research.

6. An organized program for the recruiting and training of qualified Jewish professional workers is essential. At present, we are critically lacking in sufficient quantity of such workers. The Jewish preparation of those whom we have attracted often leaves much to be desired. Recruiting activities must be organized on a broad community basis. Training resources must be improved and conditions of work made more attractive both to secure and retain workers in Jewish communal services.
7. There must be a communal approach to the discovery and development of Jewishly-committed lay leaders in order to cope with the critical gap which exists in this respect.

All of this involves serious responsibilities on the part of both the local and the national Jewish communities, but especially an obligation of national Jewish communal agencies to make major efforts.

There must be a new determination that the central commitment of all agen-

cies is the achievement of a rich and enduring Jewish life in modern America. National agencies must be prepared to re-think their work so that this priority is expressed in their services and programs. This must receive the first rank in the use of funds, just as it must receive prior consideration by fund-distributing groups.

There must be a readiness by the agencies for frank appraisal of the effectiveness of present programs: of the reasons for inadequacies where they fall short and of the changes which are required. Emphasis must be given to planning, experimentation and demonstration, and to the development of new programs and the use of new methodology.

There must be new forms of collaboration among the Jewish organizations in dealing with this situation. This joint

effort must embrace planning for programs and services to meet the needs. It must include the areas of programming and program materials, and collaborative production of texts, exhibits, audio-visual materials, adult education guides, cultural program materials, discussion outlines and local archives. There must be a unified plan for recruiting professional workers and training them. Research must be integrated and unified.

If we are to be appropriately responsive to the challenges which confront American Jewry today, our national programs for Jewish commitment, knowledge and culture must achieve the kind of unity and coordination which will assure the vital utilization of their great potential effectiveness in behalf of American Jewry.

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