

SUMMARY ON DISCUSSION GROUPS *

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THE discussion groups addressed themselves to the three papers by Rabbi Lelyveld, Dr. Slawson, and Dr. Dinin.¹ These papers were summarized for the discussion groups on Monday and I will therefore merely indicate the essential points at this time.

Rabbi Lelyveld felt that Jews have a somewhat superficial attachment to their heritage. In this nuclear era of fear and tension, the Jewish heritage offers tremendous potential for the solution of personal and social problems, were it but understood, accepted, and integrated.

Dr. Slawson's view of Jewish life in America is sociological. It has been conditioned by the special characteristics of American culture and will continue to develop in accordance with these characteristics. Reflecting these characteristics, our organized Jewish life is essentially secular, although rooted in religious values. We tend to identify ourselves as a people and community as well as a religious group. The sense of Jewish identity is growing stronger. This identity consists of many elements; creedal, communal, sacred, secular, religious, social, ethnic, etc.

* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Cleveland, Ohio, June 3, 1963.

¹ pp. 11; 17; 26; respectively, this issue.

Dr. Dinin believes that the organized Jewish community and its agencies no longer reflect Jewish life as it is today. Religion and the synagogue are central, and from them are derived the manpower, leadership, funds, social action and social services necessary for Jewish life. This accounts for the sense of alienation which besets the Jewish communal worker who rejects his religious heritage. The solution is a return to that heritage.

It should be noted that these papers aroused a special degree of interest. Discussion was animated and lengthy. It was evident that the subject and issues reached many of us on a level of feeling which was unusual. More surprising, however, was the fact that, in spite of some minor differences, there was a remarkable unanimity of thinking on a number of basic questions.

Perhaps the greatest unanimity was in the view that it was unnecessary and unwise to adopt a unilateral view of Jewish life in this country. The concept of religious centrality was seen as an artificial oversimplification. Most of the groups developed the view that Jewish life was both religious and secular; that its proliferation was one of its strengths and glories; that the growing importance of the synagogue can and should be accepted without sacrifice of the concept

of Jewish life as a broad spectrum of phases and activities in the nature of a civilization.

In this connection, it was of particular interest to note that several of the groups felt that the growing secularization of the synagogue was a fact of life which should be accepted. This implied that synagogues and rabbis should be more involved in the activities of the community and the agencies; that this involvement should be genuine and not a tactical or public relations gesture.

In several of the groups, a poll of those present revealed that all were members of synagogues and that such membership was taken for granted. This led the discussion to focus upon the question of commitment. What emerged was of sufficient interest to warrant special stress, since it goes to the heart of the problem. These groups agreed:

1) That there was no question about the personal feeling of Jewish commitment held by those present.

2) Dr. Dinin's assumption of Jewish communal workers as a group of alienated and uncommitted people is unwarranted. His viewpoint seemed more appropriate to previous generations of Jewish communal workers.

3) The problem was not so much whether one had a personal sense of Jewish identification and commitment, but rather how our agencies expressed this commitment in their programs and professional practices. It was this area that was considered to require continued discussion in depth.

4) There was therefore no disagreement that Jewish communal workers have a responsibility for the maintenance, development and survival of Jewish life. It was rather a problem of agencies defining their Jewish objectives in community terms.

There was special stress on the responsibility which rests with those professionals who are in a position to af-

fect community policy. It is they in particular who must have a philosophy and viewpoint regarding the nature and objectives of the Jewish community; it is their obligation to help give the lay leadership a sense of direction related to sectarian principles and objectives, so that decision-making can be related to these principles and objectives.

There was concern with the problem of communication. It was strongly felt that poor communication creates ignorance, misunderstanding and divisiveness in spite of many areas of possible agreement. It is therefore essential that appropriate channels of communication be established among Jewish social workers, educators, rabbis, and others concerned with Jewish communal problems, programs, and activities.

There was a great deal of discussion, but less unanimity, on the question of what validly makes an agency Jewish. To some it was Jewish sponsorship; to others it was sponsorship, staff and clientele; to others it was the presence of a definite viewpoint and program directed toward the specific goal of Jewish survival.

There was considerable interest in the question of training of Jewish communal workers in relation to Jewish commitment. While it was granted that commitment implies viewpoint and attitude, these must be fortified by specific knowledge. While there were differences of opinion as to what should be expected of the Jewish communal worker regarding activism in the area of commitment, there was broad agreement that, insofar as possible, they should have strong grounding in the Jewish heritage and its values. It was suggested that, wherever possible, special courses be offered by communities and agencies.

Some concern was expressed that too great a focus upon problems of Jewish identity might weaken the need to be concerned with the larger social scene.

It was recalled that there was a time when Jewish community agencies and communal workers were more concerned with social problems and action. This was related to the view that there appeared to be some contradictions in the development of Jewish life in this country. On the one hand, there is the drive to develop a clear sense of identity with its implication of separateness; on the other hand, there is the pressure to integrate and increasingly to be an accepted part of the total American scene.

There was considerable confusion about the definition of terms, and an expressed need for further discussion and clarification of such concepts as "secular community," "centrality of religion," "Jewish commitment." Some even questioned the indiscriminate use of the term "survival" when more appropriate terms were indicated, such as "enrichment" and "advancement."

Perhaps the most striking aspect of these discussions was the positive note of optimism which permeated the discussions. The defensive note of previous discussions was almost entirely absent. There was security and clarity about personal commitment and Jewish iden-

tification, but continuing doubt and confusion about the nature of professional commitment.

Another pervasive note was an impatience with viewpoints which tended to divide Jewish communal workers at a time when increasing unity was possible. A major factor in this divisiveness was seen as the continuing refusal of many non-social workers to understand and accept the professional objectives, methods, and limitations of professional social work. This again implied the continuing need for effective communication, mutual understanding, and support.

The conclusion seemed general that the time is past for unnecessary recriminations and attacks upon an assortment of straw men. Jewish communal workers, like many other American Jews, are much more secure about being Jews. They increasingly accept the principle of responsibility for Jewish survival and enrichment. There remains the complex problem of translating this principle into professional terms. As a professional group, we will continue to make progress if we unite to deal with this problem in a professional way.