

## RESPECTIVE ROLES OF SYNAGOGAL AND OTHER JEWISH AGENCIES

Report of Subcommittee of Committee on Public Issues,  
National Conference of Jewish Communal Service

One of the distinctive characteristics of Judaism is that it does not make sharp and arbitrary distinctions between the sacred and the secular. The result has been that Jewish life historically has been enriched by the vigorous participation of rabbis in "secular" problems and by laymen undertaking religious responsibilities that in other traditions would be reserved for clerics.

Institutionally, this lack of compartmentalization has been vastly enriching, but also productive of problems of relationship. Precisely how can synagogues and lay agencies relate to each other most effectively . . . making their special competence most available to each other, but avoiding "jurisdictional disputes"?

Questions of this kind, as with most really profound issues, do not lend themselves to any kind of final solution. Each generation will undoubtedly and properly define the relationships between Jewish secular and religious institutions in the light of the needs of the times.

It was therefore appropriate that Manheim Shapiro and his committee approached their assignment in a spirit of focusing the problem, of defining alternatives, of shaping issues, in order that social workers and rabbis (and lay people attached to agencies and synagogues) might address themselves in depth to questions of their creative relationship.

The Committee on Public Issues is gratified at the excellent reception of its subcommittee's report at the last Conference in Cleveland. We now hope for maximum discussion and consideration where it most counts—at the local level.

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### Introduction

**T**HROUGHOUT their long history, the Jews have demonstrated a capacity to evolve institutions which served to maintain their religion and their group life. As the conditions in which they lived changed, so did various institutions rise and fall in the degree of their centrality and significance in the lives of the community of Jews. Sometimes, a single institution became the center around which all Jewish communal life revolved; at others, a variety of institutions, each with its own area of interest (and sometimes competitive with each other), were established to serve communal needs. As the roles of the institutions varied, so, too, did the roles of the functionaries attached to these institutions.

For the most part, these variations were related to the nature of the society within which Jews lived. In certain European countries, for example, the government maintained its relationships with Jews as a body through a consistory or religious council; in others, a non-religious council of community leaders acted as a representative body for the Jews of a city or country; and in still others, there was no "official" body of Jews at all. This process continues. Certain European countries today have a "Chief Rabbi"; America has none.

In conformity with this evolutionary pattern, institutions have been created

and maintained by American Jewry in accordance with their visions of themselves, of their needs and of the world around them. In the course of this process, too, there has been a tidal ebb and flow for various types of institutions as needs, outlooks, and circumstances changed.

In recent years, there has been considerable public debate—or better stated, expressions of views—over the appropriate roles of particular Jewish institutions and agencies. Most particularly, the conflict has revolved around the relative roles of the synagogal institutions and their personnel as against other Jewish communal institutions and their personnel.

The Subcommittee on Respective Roles of Synagogal and Other Jewish Agencies of the Committee on Public Issues of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service had a comparatively limited assignment. It was asked to examine the problem and to see if it could be formulated in such ways as would enable members of the Conference to see the problems more clearly, approach them more thoughtfully and act on them in accordance with such clarity and thoughtfulness, but by their own lights. We were enjoined from seeking to make any determination of what is “right” or “wrong” in the various positions as being inappropriate to the role of the Conference.

Our subcommittee found, once it began its work, that the subject was complex and ramified, involving questions of sociology, history, language and even personalities. We struggled with this through five meetings between March 1, 1962, and January 11, 1963. The material below, arrived at in the course of those meetings, is offered as a limited statement which we hope will both enable and stimulate members of the Conference to pursue the subject further,

discuss it with colleagues and others, and move toward calm resolution of some of the issues and conflicts.

### I. The Issues

The issues around the respective roles of synagogal and other Jewish agencies arise in a variety of forms, among which are the following:

- A. Synagogal activities which appear to social agencies as competitive with their own role; e.g., “synagogue centers” or other “group work” activities in the synagogues; family or personal counseling by rabbis; community relations efforts by rabbis or synagogue committees outside the orbit of the local Jewish community relations council or committee.
- B. Criticism by synagogal representatives of the character or degree of the “Jewishness” of the activity or motivation of the social agencies and their staffs. Into this category fall such criticisms as those of “health clubs” as being not necessarily “Jewish”; of the failure of caseworkers to be guided to any degree in their case decisions by Jewish law or values. Or of the actual violation of Jewish traditional law in such matters as serving of non-kosher food or the conduct of “inappropriate” activities on the Sabbath.
- C. Mutual questioning and criticism of the professional equipment of the personnel on the two sides of the equation: with the synagogal representatives asserting the inadequacy of the Jewish knowledge, training and commitment of the social agency workers, and the social workers asserting the inadequacy of the professional training of

- rabbis in casework, psychiatric insight, and group work skills.
- D. Differences in concept of "community primacy" of the respective institutions. On the one side are those who conceive of an entity "the Jewish community" of which all the agencies and institutions, including synagogues, are component parts, and these are likely to add that the synagogues are committed to "branches" of Judaism and hence less representative of Jewry as a whole and limited in their services to segments of the Jewish group, whereas the social agencies are more universal in their acceptance and serving of all elements of Jewry. On the other side are synagogal representatives who maintain that since Jews are characteristically a "religious" group, the synagogue is actually the appropriate center of Jewish activity and that the "community" of synagogues is in fact the truly "Jewish" community.
- E. In this latter context there appears a disagreement over the actual functions of the respective agencies, with some synagogal representatives asserting that the social agencies should in fact be providing advisory and coordinating services for social work programs in the synagogues (parallel to the services of Bureaus of Jewish Education to congregational schools). The social agencies, on the other hand, maintain that synagogues should avail themselves of services provided in the social agencies by and to the "larger" Jewish community and should refer members of the congregation for specific services and encourage them to participate in "total" Jewish communal life.
- F. Related to this issue is the one of financial support to Jewish institutions. Some central fund-raising groups have felt that synagogues have not participated as wholeheartedly in community fund-raising as they should. Some synagogue representatives, on the other hand, have expressed the view that there has been an erroneous and unjust insistence that synagogues and their activities must be supported solely by their members while the "secular" (and hence less Jewish) agencies are to be supported by Jews as a whole.
- G. Behind all this is a series of philosophical and sociological concepts which remain unresolved and which are often mutually contradictory. Examples are the ambiguities in such terms as "religion," "peoplehood," "community," "belongingness," "commitment," "survival," and many other terms over which there is little agreement as to their meaning and as to their implications for illuminating the aforementioned conflicts.

## **II. Attempts at Resolution**

In some communities, efforts have been or are being made to allay the tensions which arise over or from this issue. Some examples are:

- A. In New York City, the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies has established a Commission on Synagogue Relations. This Commission, with the cooperation of the New York Board of Rabbis, seeks to increase mutual interpretation and understanding between synagogal and other Jewish agencies through conferences, seminars and various other joint efforts. Similarly, with the help of the Jewish Education

Committee of New York, Jewish orientation courses are made available to workers of Federation agencies.

- B. In Essex County, N.J. (Newark and environs) a series of conferences between rabbis and social agency workers sought to define the specific issues over which conflicts arise between social agency workers and religious leaders, and if possible, to resolve these conflicts. While the conferences did not, it is reported, actually resolve all or many of the conflicts, greater understanding of the respective positions of the protagonists of various points of view was achieved.
- C. In some communities, there have been occasional, or regular joint meetings of executives of federation agencies and the local rabbinate for the exchange of information on current activities in the community, impending events or common problems.

### III. Conclusion

This report is submitted to the Committee on Public Issues and to the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service with the hope that they will find it useful and worthy of dissemination, in whatever way they deem appropriate, to members of the National Conference; and that it will serve to assist individuals and groups to explore these issues further and move toward their resolution without undue rancor and conflict. We append a brief, suggestive bibliography, which we hope will serve those who seek to continue their exploration.

We thank both Chairmen of the Committee on Public Issues under whom we served, Walter Lurie and Sidney Vincent, and the President of the National Conference in 1962-3, Philip Soskis, for

their continuous understanding, support and encouragement.

Respectfully submitted,

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