

Social Work Education in Israel: An Analysis and Some Suggestions

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... Continued imitation of the content and pattern of American social work education has constrained Israelis from striking out on their own and developing on Israeli social work. It is time for Israelis to get over the self-hate implied in constant efforts to show the Americans that they can do the same thing better. It is equally time for Americans to stop telling Israelis how to do it. Their two attitudes together seem to promote a circle of competition which leaves the needs of the students and the country out.

Introduction

To spend a year as a visiting professor in Israel is a thing of joy. It is also a sobering experience. The needs of the land are great. Each program investment uses vital resources. The commitment has been to excellence as the optimal strategy for using resources wisely. As Shlomo Lahat said recently:

The important question is what kind of society we are going to produce. If we don't go for the highest standards we will have failed.¹

This policy has been a spectacular success.

Another important question is how to retain the vision and the quality which were so necessary for Israel's creation and survival.² The contribution which social work education in Israel makes to answering this question is the focus of this paper.³ The analysis is set within the context of the society, the organization of social welfare, and the organization of the profession. I am mindful of my role as stranger; I was in

but not of this system. I promise no instant solutions; only the hope that I can contribute to an ongoing and necessary dialogue.

The Social Climate

Powerful political and social forces combine to create and sustain an amorphous environment for Israeli social work education. Most important is survival. To live with the constant threat of annihilation entails high costs. Israelis do what they have to while trying to live as normally as possible. One soon learns to recognize the underlying tension which comes from this effort. It is often incorrectly interpreted as *chutzpa*.⁴ This brash Israeli style is the attempt to ward off the threat of personal debilitation. Amia Lieblich uses questions to project a picture of what Israelis struggle with:

Do heroes have to be rigid? Are all rigid heroes insecure underneath? Can this be said for an entire country or generation?⁵

The questions are almost plaintive. Israeli society is an enigma; there is not much trust in government, politicians are suspect, fiscal accountability in distributing national

¹ Shlomo Lahat is the Mayor of Tel Aviv and a general in the army reserve. These remarks are from a talk he gave at the Baltimore Suburban Club on 1/17/82.

² Harris Chaiklin, "The Social Policy of Denial: Unemployment in Israel," *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* VI (May 1979):326-338.

³ During 1976-1977 I was Senior Fulbright Lecturer at the Haifa University School of Social Work and in 1980-1981 I was Visiting Professor at the same school.

⁴ There are, of course, other reactions to the pressure of living in this society. This paper is not intended to cover the varieties of Israeli responses to stress. The illustration selected is modal and familiar.

⁵ Amia Lieblich, *Tin Soldiers on Jerusalem Beach*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978:162.

funds is minimal, and there is widespread tax avoidance. The country is one where people are rich and the government is poor. In Saul Friedlander's inspired words:

A powerful forward impetus is being maintained, despite obstacles; at the same time, on another level, forces of disintegration are undermining our efforts. Israel: country of every possible contradiction and every possible paradox.⁶

Taken at face value this is a dour and pessimistic analysis. What saves it all is the Israeli character. Despite his apparent abrasiveness, the Israeli is pragmatic, cares about other people, and believes that the dream on which the country is based can come true. As Marvin Hamlish, the composer, said during a visit in 1981, "Israel is the only place where you get off the plane and reporters ask how you like the country."

All these qualities are reflected in the country's social services and social work profession. By and large the basic material needs of people are met. In this respect Israeli social welfare is superior to that of the United States. It is often hard to see that the basic social provision is so good for these services are delivered through a bewildering number of overlapping and conflicting ministries and jurisdictions. There is a special problem with large domestic and external quasi-governmental agencies such as the Histadrut and the Joint Distribution Committee. And, for reasons which are developed in this paper, the line social worker is not highly skilled. One reflection of this is that at a time of retrenchment in Israeli social services there is continued advertisement in American publications to hire American-educated masters-level social workers.

Given the constant high level of threat under which Israel lives, it is not surprising that it has been hard to develop an efficient

system of social services staffed by competent professionals. Measure the needs of defense against the needs for social services and there is no question of where the priorities lie. The only observation I would make in respect to this is that, if too neglected, the resulting inefficient meeting of social needs drains, rather than contributes to, the country's strength.

Government and Social Welfare

Israel was created mainly by people committed to social democratic principles. Their assumptions were utopian. They regarded the need for social services as reflecting societal failure and proceeded to act as if they were not necessary since they had created the perfect world. Anyone who could not fit into this world was considered morally deficient, not worthy of help. Since the founders never achieved a majority government and since welfare was not central to them, they turned this ministry over to their religious partners in the coalition, who promptly proceeded to turn it into a base for political operations and did nothing to build a Jewish social work based on traditional community and family values. When, after thirty years, the opposition came to power, labor left behind an impotent system; one not equipped to function in a modern society.

The government which took over in 1977 is *laissez faire* oriented. It looks at anyone who cannot fit into this society as suffering from personal moral deficiency. While the philosophical underpinnings of its reasoning may differ from those of the social democrats, the result is the same. The Ministry of Labor and Welfare continues to be a weak ministry used more as a base for political operations than for developing the institutional base of social welfare.⁷

⁶ Saul Friedlander, *When Memory Comes*. New York: Avon Books, 1980:9.

⁷ Symptomatic of this is that after the 1980 election when the religious minister, Aharon Abuhatzera, lost out in a power struggle and was in the midst of charges related to fraud, bribery, and mishandling funds, he was appointed Minister of Labor and Welfare.

The Social Work Profession

Given a social climate which necessarily places social welfare low on its list of concerns and a government which at best can be described as indifferent, it is little wonder that there is not a strong organized social work profession that can play a role in setting standards. The lack of professional strength means that social work is on the defensive. The profession is largely made up of women whose work often represents a second job in the family. They accept low status, low pay, and restrictions on practice because it meets their family needs; they do not have to work nights or weekends and, in fact, would not. They do not fight for professional issues. There is a strong Histadrut union. It protects working conditions, does moderately well on wages, and nothing for professional standards. The organization of a professional social work association is barely in its infancy.

Social Work Education

The Schools

There are four schools of social work: Hebrew University, Tel Aviv, and Haifa, which offer a range of specializations, most of which are in casework, and Bar Ilan, the one school under religious auspices, which has specialized in community work. A fifth school is being developed at Beersheba. In addition, the Kibbutz runs a training program at Ruppin. Up until now their graduates have been licensed by the Ministry. The same holds for other small non-university programs conducted by the Ministry.

There is some question as to whether the non-university programs will continue to be licensed. Like most things in Israel, this situation reflects what Abraham Kaplan has termed, "The Three Laws of Israeli Reality." "Every privilege becomes a right . . . Every right is denied . . . And every

denial is negotiable."⁸ Whether or not to continue to license or even continue non-university programs has been decided and undecided several times and is still under negotiation.

It is my impression that as far as numbers are concerned the needs of the country are being met by the schools. There are problems of distribution just as there are in the United States. It is difficult to get workers to go into aging, but all the "therapists" jobs are filled. It is difficult to get workers to fill jobs in the rural areas, but all the positions in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv are filled.⁹ In fact, one of the major justifications for developing a new school at Beersheba is that it will help meet the needs of the Negev.

The Degrees

The B.A. The basic professional degree is the B.A. This is acquired in three years. These two elements have important implications for education and the future practice of social work. Students do not start the university until they have completed their military obligation. They are older and more involved in life than the too few Arab students. Many of the students have worked before they come to school. One gets used to students who miss class because of reserve duty, or because they are having a baby, or because they have been up for three nights with their children in a bomb shelter.

The education is organized with a mixture of European and American characteristics. A student takes all his courses in

⁸ Professor Kaplan is in the philosophy department at Haifa University. During 1976-1977 and 1980-1981 I was privileged to attend his seminar on Twentieth Century Philosophy. These remarks were made at one of those seminars.

⁹ Shlomo Sharlin and Harris Chaiklin, "Social Work Supervision on Wheels," in *Social Work Supervision*, Carlton E. Munson, ed. New York: The Free Press, 1979:166-175.

his major or in closely related faculties. There is no room or time for such things as broad-based liberal arts requirement. Once during a faculty discussion which concerned why students were doing so poorly at report writing, I inquired whether it would be possible to develop a course in professional writing. The reply was that the high schools took care of language instruction.

To attempt to develop a professional social worker in three years is to create an exercise in endurance. Students average more than thirty hours a week in class and field. The first year is devoted largely to foundation courses, most of which are standard introductory social science courses. Foundation courses are often taught by non-social workers who have little ability to connect the course content to later or current professional activities. In the second and third year the students are in the field twenty hours a week, so the combined class and field experience is closer to forty than to thirty hours.

Social work education at the B.A. level consists of a lot of exposure to on-the-job training, a lot of lectures, and very little reading or consistent supervised practice experience. This may have been the educational and realistic need of the country when the first school was set up thirty years ago; it does not fill the need of a modern nation.

One option for the B.A. is to make all three years directly reflect professional training. In the first year students should begin doing field work where they are assigned specific tasks by a caseworker, for example, to help and accompany an older person who must move from a hospital to a nursing home. The foundation courses should be taught from a practice-oriented base. This would mean that sociology and psychology would be taught from the point of what they contribute to practice. Such an arrangement would permit a more balanced program in the three years and

would permit time for things like professional writing so that students could learn to present concise and coherent case summaries.

Another option would be to combine the B.A. with the M.A. and make it a four-and-one-half or five-year program. This would permit time for a well rounded professional education. This would enable social workers to be considered on the same level as psychologists.

The M.A. All schools offer the M.A., but it is not practice-oriented. Given that most schools require practice before one can start, that most students work while taking the degree, and that the M.A. thesis is considered to be "almost like a Ph.D. thesis," the masters degree is not a fruitful source for either advanced practitioners or future faculty members. It is a long grind that leads nowhere; most students are well into their thirties when they get the M.A. Those who have the resources and want to progress rapidly "go West" for a social work practice degree or enter directly into Ph.D. programs.

Few holders of the Israeli M.A. remain in direct practice, especially when they become supervisors. One cannot be an effective supervisor without being in practice. A profession cannot be built by educating for practice and then measuring success by how far one gets away from it. The skilled practitioner capable of becoming a student supervisor must be able to earn as much as the administrator of at least a medium sized agency.

The M.A. degree needs to become more practice-oriented. Graduates of a more practice-oriented program will understand that casework is more inclusive than therapy, that delivery of services is the heart of the profession, and that properly directed non-professional and volunteer workers can do many essential service tasks.

The Ph.D. No school offers the Ph.D. One is needed so that Israel can develop its

own knowledge base for the profession. Without this Israel will continue to develop most of its senior faculty abroad. The degree should be a Ph.D. and not a D.S.W. The doctor of philosophy degree signifies acceptance into the universal community of scholars. What distinguishes the Ph.D. from the D.S.W. is its emphasis on theory. D.S.W.s go through life explaining what the initials mean. They also have a tendency to tell you they took courses with sociology and psychology students and did better than they did. Even if it were true, who cares? Most D.S.W. programs give this degree because university committees responsible for reviewing new programs did not see the school of social work as strong enough to offer the Ph.D. The weakness of social work education is often hidden by faculty members who are unable to direct a thesis but who prattle about giving a professional as opposed to an academic doctorate. They provide the smokescreen which allows the rest of the university faculty, often with words of fulsome praise, to disassociate themselves from the school of social work. Given the emphasis on status in Israel it would be a waste of time to offer anything but a Ph.D. If the social work educator is not respected in the university, the chances of creating good professional education are diminished.

No one school of social work is large enough to offer a Ph.D. in all specializations. To cover what the country needs requires cooperation between universities and faculties. At the same time all schools should have faculty in all specializations. This will promote flexibility and healthy competition so that a school does not come to feel it owns the right to grant a degree in a given specialization. It would not be impossible to have one graduate school with several degree-granting institutions.

Cooperation would mean that candidates for the Ph.D. could learn with the truly outstanding scholars in the country. It would not be unreasonable to expect that

once in two or three years all students in the program would take a course with Abraham Kaplan in the philosophy of science and one in methodology with Louis Guttman. What it will take to set up such a program is social work faculty who are not threatened by their colleagues in the university. Faculty development is the most urgent need of social work education in Israel.

The Faculty

In Israel, university standards, especially in regard to publication, are high and generally adhered to. This contributes to sharp divisions between classroom faculty who teach basic subjects and those who teach social work practice. Those faculty who teach basic subjects tend to have the Ph.D. and often are either not social workers or social work-oriented. The practice teachers frequently have an American Masters degree but are not as committed to research and publication as their colleagues.

The English Language. Israeli universities not only demand publication, but they demand it in English. There is a paradox at work: build a Jewish state and restore Hebrew as a living language, but publish in English. It is a paradox which is not too difficult to understand. Publications in Hebrew will only be read and used by a few people. English is the standard by which the worth and reputation of any work are established. Hebrew just is not a language for the mass dissemination of ideas. Israeli social work educators must know English:

... Most of the texts come from England or the United States. Similarly, almost all of the social work educators in Israel received their professional education in North America. The first schools borrowed the curricula of American graduate schools of social work.¹⁰

¹⁰ F.M. Lowenberg, "Social Work Education in Israel, in *Issues and Explorations in Social Work Education*, Shimon E. Spiro, ed. Tel Aviv: Israeli Association of Schools of Social Work, 1978:7-8.

Lowenberg goes on to note that overseas methods do not always fit the country's needs and that indigenous material is now being produced. While I heartily support the former point I did not find much evidence of the latter. Israeli course outlines contain relatively little in the way of bibliography. Students do not read much. There is no systematic effort by faculty to keep abreast of pertinent literature. In preparation for my sabbatical, I found almost twenty articles in English, on Israeli subjects and pertinent to social work education. Only one or two of these showed up in other course outlines and none was available in translation.

Translation, by the way, is often suggested as one way to cope with the continued production of Israeli academic and professional content in English. It will not work for this or for the range of other necessary material in English. Modern reproduction methods are efficient but expensive. Translation projects cannot keep up with the rapid dating of ideas. Certain classics should be translated. Many of the published translations are poor. Good translation requires a major effort.

Since most of the important social work literature is in English and since it is unlikely there will be a Hebrew literature large enough to provide a social work education in the language, the only answer is that faculty and students must be proficient in English.

Many of the severe strains in Israeli social work education are directly related to problems around English. For example, the classroom faculty who are academically oriented tend to be more proficient in English than those who teach clinical subjects and supervise fieldwork. This adds to the traditional strain between class and field faculty.

Most striking is the failure to develop a social work education founded in the Jewish ethic. Western oriented literature stresses such concepts as individualism and

confidentiality. A Jewish oriented social worker "should" stress family, community, and openness. American students with an interest in Jewish social work can get more of an exposure to ethical issues than the Israeli student. I am not sure G-d was a functional caseworker, but I found little evidence that Israeli social work students were exposed to works such as Linzer's *The Nature of Man in Judaism and Social Work*.¹¹ I am amazed at how often Maimonides was misquoted to fit the prevailing ethic in American social work literature. The highest form of giving is not to give in secret, that is second, but:

Supreme above all is to give assistance to a fellowman, who has fallen on evil times by presenting him with a gift or loan, or entering into partnership with him, or procuring him work, thereby helping to become self-supporting.¹²

Perhaps it is another one of the paradoxes of Israel, but it would appear to me that mastery of English by both faculty and students would enable Israeli social work education to be based more in the Jewish ethic. This relates more to understanding what we believe in than to specific religious practice.

The Students

At the bottom of this pile is the student. Looking up they see and are part of a tense social climate, a confusing array of governmental services, and a faculty often preoccupied with their own needs. They bring with them their own pressures from work, family, or military responsibilities. They experience long class and field hours. In addition, they must do a lot of their reading in English.

¹¹ Norman Linzer, *The Nature of Man in Judaism and Social Work*. New York: Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, 1978.

¹² Maimonides, "Ways of Giving Charity," in *The Wisdom of Israel*. Lewis Browne, ed. New York: The Modern Library, 1945, p. 432. (From Yad, Mattenot Aniyyim X, 1-14).

The average student responds to education as if it was a threat to his existence. There is a tremendous intellectual rigidity and a fear that something will be missed. Almost every American I know who teaches for the first time in Israel will comment with surprise about how, when they walk into class and say "good morning," all the students write it down. All those good mornings are written in several carbon copies for friends who are not in class for one reason or another. Reading is divided up and translation summaries, usually poor, are exchanged. Like their American counterparts, they steal books from the library and razor articles out of bound journal volumes. Taking examinations calls forth creative forms of cooperation.

This catalog of student behavior could go on for many pages. The theme is always the same; students appear to exert great effort to avoid doing what is expected of them. When asked about this they say, "We are helping each other." Having heard this response many times, and upon consideration, I have concluded that the students are correct; they are neither lazy nor morally reprehensible. What they are doing is reacting to a set of impossible expectations. Occasionally when things reach a point of overflow there is an organized protest, but for the most part these pressures are handled the way most things are in the larger society; slipping and sliding where possible, being rigid and sticking to the letter of the presumed law when there is a threat of being pushed into something that is unknown.

What makes it all bearable is that students care about each other and their society. In contrast to Americans, a greater number of Israeli students express belief in their country and its values. Israeli schools are no better or worse than those in America: none of them educates competent practitioners. The behavior here is a response to specific expectations and

rewards.

Visitors

One of the most interesting spectator sports I found was to observe the interaction between Israeli social work educators and their numerous American counterparts who visit each year. Such visits can be helpful for they provide outside ideas and stimulation. This often does not happen because both sides put on public performances rather than exchange ideas. My own impression from witnessing numerous such exchanges is that the participants do not lie, but they do not tell the truth either. Refusal to look at such things as connections between class and field and the need to set minimal practice standards leads to what amounts to mutual admiration talks.

That Israeli educators and their American visitors should be in such agreement is not surprising, for most of the Israelis were either once Americans or had studied with their visitors. This leads to an interesting by-product in these exchanges of puffery. Israelis are constantly trying to show that they are up-to-date with the modern world by adopting American programs. They add an interesting Israeli twist since most of these programs have been a dismal failure. They say we know these things did not work but we will learn from the American mistakes and do it better.

Observation of activities which may range from Project Renewal to Teaching Centers indicates their similarity to the American approach. It is somewhat disheartening to listen, for example, to an Israeli policy analyst tell about how Project Renewal will give the poor the chance to control their lives for the first time. The echoes of the dismal American Community Action Program are strong in Project Renewal. It does no good to point out that one of the achievements of Israel has been its ability to integrate many racial and ethnic groups. It does even less good to point out the divisive nature of such cant

and the role it played in creating riots and Black anti-Semitism in America. What gets lost in all of this is that Israel's progress with minority groups is stymied by lack of economic growth. In the end there is a lot of rhetoric and very little knowledge about the condition of Israel's poor because not enough professors are doing basic research in this area. Politics is not a substitute for scholarship though many Israeli professors act as if it is.

Conclusion

My overall impression of this review of societal, governmental, and professional pressures on Israeli social work education is that continued imitation of the content and pattern of American social work education has constrained Israelis from striking out on their own and developing *Israeli* social work. It is time for Israelis to get over the self-hate implied in their constant efforts to show the Americans that they can do the same thing better. It is equally time for Americans to stop telling Israelis how to do it. These two attitudes together seem to promote a circle of competition which leaves out the needs of the students and the country.

The remedy I would propose is more,

rather than less, contact. It should be contact at the practice level. Israelis have had more contact with American universities and agencies than their American counterparts have had with Israeli's. American professors who visit have tended to be predominantly in policy and planning rather than in casework. There have been relatively few American practitioners in Israel. With some imagination this balance can be redressed. Even the language is not an insurmountable obstacle. There are opportunities to practice in English. What few opportunities I have had to observe the results of sustained practice contacts have generally been positive. This includes students and faculty from Haifa University who have spent time at Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York and the interchange between Temple University and Haifa University around the Center for Human Development in Philadelphia which has been established in the School of Social Work. Out of contacts at this level it should be possible to develop the standards of excellence in practice and education that will keep American Jewish social work moving forward and contribute to Israel's struggle for survival. I can't wait to go back again.