

THE JEWISH HERITAGE AND THE SOCIAL AGENCY*

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THE events of the past decade have forced upon the Jew throughout the world a re-examination of his status and responsibility as a Jew. In the United States these events have resulted in a resurgence of Jewish cultural life and a seeking out of Jewish cultural forms which are compatible with living as Americans. In a sense, the Jew has become more self conscious and aware of his difference from, as well as his similarity to, other Americans. This development has followed a period when there had tended, on the part both of individual Jews and of Jewish institutions to deny their difference and submerge their identity completely in the American lifestream. For Jewish institutions too this current period has been marked by a re-examination of their status and role in American Jewish life.

It is the purpose of this paper to examine the implications of "Jewishness" for the Jewish social agency. If the Jewish social agency is to provide its maximum service to its clients and fulfill its role in the Jewish community it must face the implications of its Jewishness for itself as an agency, for its staff, for its clients, and for the community. The complexities of such a

problem are so vast, that no one paper can do more than touch on certain aspects of it and raise questions for further study and examination. It is also recognized that a single statement cannot encompass the many currents of Jewish thought and be valid for all of them. This paper thus represents the thinking of one social worker practicing within one particular social agency.**

In considering the implications of Jewishness for the social agency, we are confronted with a difficult problem, the confusion about the meaning of "Jewishness." What is it that uniquely differentiates the Jewish from the non-Jewish? This problem of definition is one with which Jewish philosophy has struggled for many years. The conclusions which have evolved have varied with the orientation of the scholars who have developed them. No one definition is acceptable to all schools of Jewish thought. It is my feeling, however, that such a precise definition is not necessary for an examination of the implications of Jewishness. We can begin with the assumption that we are different. For the purpose of this paper, the difference is taken as axio-

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** The contents of this paper represent the author's own thinking. While the general point of view expressed is consistent with that of the agency, the author wishes to take responsibility for any particular idea advanced here.

matic, despite the recognition that there are Jews who would question it. Perhaps, for that group, such a paper can have no meaning.

While we cannot state precisely what differentiates us from non-Jews, there are certain aggregate factors which contribute to Jewishness. Herschel Alt* cites an interpretation by Adolph S. Oko which seems to encompass many of the viewpoints regarding Jewishness. "Judaism" is interpreted as "the total harvest of thinking, feeling, living, which Israel has reaped from its earliest history to the present time . . ." It is "historical continuity and social heritage, and not racial traits that keep the Jews together and give them a sense of kinship . . . The Jews have been unified throughout their dispersion by religion, history, and common experience . . . The Jewish spirit is the collective memory of the Jewish people." We might add to such a positive statement another aspect of which we have today only too vivid a proof, that we have been unified too by the pressures from other groups both to destroy our differences and to prevent our giving them up of our own free will.

The problem of the Jewish social agency to define its difference does not appear as difficult as the problem of defining Judaism. The Jewish agency is different from the non-Jewish in that it owes its existence to the concern of the Jewish community for the welfare of its own members. It draws its funds for the most part from, and is dependent upon, the Jewish community. Together with other agencies, it is rooted in a common history of Jewish philanthropy beginning in Biblical times

* Alt, Herschel: Jewish Education and Social Adjustment. (*The Jewish Social Service Quarterly*; March, 1947; Vol. XXIII, No. 3.)

when charity was equated with justice and became one of the cardinal tenets of Judaism. Throughout the diaspora, every Jewish community of any size had a variety of welfare organizations which provided for those in need. In America, the earliest Jewish immigrant groups brought with them both the sense of responsibility for Jews in need and the organizational patterns for meeting those needs. It is from the resulting organizations that the contemporary Jewish social agency has grown.

The Jewish social agency is part of the complex of Jewish culture and deals, in one form or another, with the problems of Jews in relating to that culture or relating themselves as Jews to the culture in which they find themselves. Its clients are drawn predominantly from the Jewish community. In its Jewishness, it has a heritage which reaches back in time through thousands of years, in space encompasses the globe, and includes every socio-economic and cultural group. These factors, whether or not they are recognized, distinguish the Jewish social agency.

Jewish social agencies vary in the degree to which they recognize and make use of their difference from non-Jewish agencies. Many recognize their Jewishness and try to fulfill their role in the Jewish community. Some tend to deny the difference; attempt even to avoid it by excluding from their official names any allusions to their Jewishness. Some agencies accentuate their Jewishness to the extent of requiring every member of their staff to be Jewish, sometimes to be in accord with the particular Jewish orientation of the Board of Directors, and to limit their clientele exclusively to Jews. Other agencies have no clearly defined relation to Jewishness. In such agencies, each worker carries individual

responsibility for coping with this problem. Whatever an agency may do about it, its Jewishness remains one of its essential characteristics. The administration of an agency should carry responsibility for defining its relation to Jewishness, including it in its policy and helping staff to represent that policy. For staff and clients, whether Jewish or non-Jewish, its Jewishness has a special meaning, a meaning of which, if the agency is to render its service, it must be cognizant and with which it must deal.

The Jewish community, of which the Jewish social agency is an important part, for many of its members is vague and amorphous in its organization.* Many know of it only through their associations with other Jews. The Jew, living predominantly among non-Jewish persons, may not even have associations with other Jews to relate him to the Jewish community. In various manners, more concrete institutions have developed through which the Jewish person can come into contact with other Jews. For many, the religious institutions serve that purpose. For others, some of whom do not follow the religious pattern, social welfare organizations, the Jewish community centers, "Landsmanschaften", the fraternal orders, the Zionist groups, and the various Jewish organizations like the Hadassah and B'nai B'rith provide centers of Jewish activities—"concretizations" of Jewish community life. It is in relation to such organizations that the relationships of individual Jews with Jewishness may be worked out. Such agencies,

* For a more detailed discussion of the Jewish community and its component elements see: Silver, Harold; *Orienting Workers to Jewish Social Work. The Jewish Social Service Quarterly*; June, 1947; Vol. XXIII, No. 4.

both religious and non-religious, too, provide the organized voice of Jewry. For the Jewish community too, they constitute a form of conscience which can demand of its members certain behavior or bring pressure against them if they fail to conform to its standards. Itself widespread and amorphous, without special regulations and definite controls, the Jewish community exerts its influence over its members through such organizations. And likewise, members of the Jewish community participate in its life and add to it through their activities in relation to such organizations.

The Jewish social agency, while part of the American community, too, is a "concretization" of Jewish community life. It is an organized expression of a concern that certain needs of Jewish individuals and families be met by the Jewish community. Such a concern has implicit in it the assumption that certain of the needs of Jews are unique and may best be met by a Jewish agency. Such an agency functions then as a representative of the Jewish community. The Board of the agency symbolically represents a cross-section of the Jewish community. In a sense, the worker within the social agency who interprets its policy and translates it into service acts as a representative of the Jewish community. The client, in bringing a problem or seeking a service from a Jewish social agency similarly brings his problem or seeks a service from the Jewish community. The policy of an agency regarding the service or problem may represent to the client the reaction of the Jewish community. For all involved, whether Board, staff, or client, this role of the Jewish agency as an embodiment of the Jewish community has a special significance.

Since the Jewish agency is part of and

represents the Jewish community, it is faced with the problem of defining what its role should be in the development of Jewish community life. Should it actively further Jewish communal activity on the part of clients and workers or must its role remain entirely passive? There are social agencies whose specified function it is to further Jewish life and education. For those agencies, their responsibility to the Jewish community is clear. The social service agency established to meet specific individual and family needs, in contrast, must concentrate on fulfilling that function. Yet, through the fact that its activities, and those of staff and clients associated with it, are part of Jewish communal life, through its use of other Jewish social, educational and cultural resources, and in its furtherance of the historic Jewish tradition of meeting the needs of Jewish people, the Jewish social agency does contribute, though indirectly, to the enhancement of Jewish life.

The Jewish social agency is dual in its nature. While it is part of, and represents, the Jewish community, it is also an integral part of the American culture. From its beginnings in the United States, the Jewish social agency has had as one of its functions the integration of the Jew into the American community. This duality—being both Jewish and American—has created problems for the Jewish agency. Does reliance on Jewish agencies alone not tend to separate the Jew from the non-Jew; does it not tend to keep him cut off from the American community? The agency aware of this dilemma found it difficult to resolve at a time, until the 1930's, when the predominant welfare pattern in the United States was sectarian. In using English as its language, in using social workers trained

in basic case work skills in American universities and recognizing always the need of the Jew to relate to the American culture, the agency provided clients with some transitional experiences.

It was after 1930 when the Federal Social Security Laws established a community responsibility for certain of the needs of its members that the Jewish agency could face more directly the challenge of its duality. After a period of self-examination and experimentation, it began to develop the conclusion, one which a part of the Jewish community has as yet not fully accepted, that the Jewish agency should meet those needs of Jews not met by other community resources. Today, for example, most Jewish social agencies do not provide financial assistance for clients who meet the eligibilities of the public agency. There is a trend among some Jewish agencies today to move away from providing any type of financial assistance or specific concrete services and concentrate more exclusively on counseling help. Such a trend raises the question whether the Jewish community would permit any agency to avoid the responsibility in the area of concrete services assigned to it, at least until the American community has further developed its concept of meeting important individual needs. The Jewish social agency thus faces its duality by transferring to public and community resources the responsibilities which they are ready to carry. Concurrently, the agency continues to explore additional services for Jews to meet still unmet needs. At every point, however, it continually must face the problems inherent in its duality of being both American and Jewish.

Jewish social workers vary in the degree to which they are aware of and

make use of their role as representatives of the Jewish community. Many, perhaps, come to a Jewish agency for reasons apart from its Jewishness. Some begin from that point, but discover later their basic relationship to the community and their role as its personification. Some work in a Jewish agency because they feel more comfortable there. Others enter the Jewish agency out of a desire to serve their fellow Jews. Still others may see in Jewish social agencies an opportunity to offer a service to Jews more effective than they could offer in a non-Jewish agency.

The reason for a worker being within a Jewish agency and the meaning of Jewishness to him affect the degree and the manner in which he will utilize his role in the Jewish agency. Some workers find in its Jewishness an increased source of strength upon which they can draw in their practice. For others, their relationship to the Jewish agency may furnish a source of insecurity. Insecure in their own Jewishness, unable to identify themselves as part of the general Jewish community, they find it difficult to accept the role the agency forces upon them, to represent that community to individual clients coming to them for help. Even where the worker may not be Jewish, the fact that he works for a Jewish agency demands of him some sense of identification with Jewishness and an understanding of Jewish cultural factors. The fact of being Jewish is such an integral part of the personality of every Jew, whatever his particular reaction to Jewishness may be, that a natural question arises as to how a worker can serve Jewish clients who does not have considerable understanding of what it means to be Jewish. While service can be, and has been, given to Jews by workers in Jewish agencies

who have not had such awareness, may not the effectiveness of that service be enhanced by the degree to which the worker has an understanding of what Jewishness means not only for himself but for other groups in the Jewish community? Similarly, while lack of knowledge of language and cultural forms need not prevent the rendering of real service, possession of such knowledge and understanding can enhance that service. Cannot identification of the worker with the client through Jewishness help the client make fuller use of help and integrate it into his personality? The agency can help the worker achieve such identification through specific directives, use of informational materials and in supervision.

While identification with the client is an essential element in case work, through its use alone the client cannot get the help he needs. For every individual, a problem in his growth and development is to relate to the external reality and to accommodate his own impulses and needs to the limits inherent in an environment made up of other persons. While the client comes to the Jewish agency concerned with his needs and seeking to meet them to the fullest extent possible, the agency, a part of reality and limited by its functions and policy, must relate those needs to its own function. Where a Jewish client comes to a Jewish agency, identifies with it through its Jewishness, he expects perhaps a fuller meeting of his needs than he would from a non-Jewish agency. It is consequently more difficult for him to accept the differences between what the agency can do and what he himself expects. Yet, basic to case work skill, is the use of difference in helping the client. The teacher, for example, cannot help the student unless he has some-

thing to offer which is different from what the student brings. She must begin at a point somewhat beyond him and help him to reach it. As the teacher presents problems to students which involve learning for solution, as she brings her own knowledge and understanding and aids the student to assimilate it, the student, stimulated in his own thinking by that difference, uses her in learning. Similarly, the case worker uses difference in her help with clients. The worker, identified with the client in his Jewishness, may find it more difficult to use the differences inherent in his role as representative of the agency. In such situations the identification which we have above described as helpful, may also constitute a problem in case work practice of which the worker must be aware and with which he must cope.

In coming to a Jewish agency, the client reacts to its Jewishness with the attitudes and feelings which have developed in his own growth as a Jew. It is difficult to generalize what being a Jew means to the individual client. For some clients, Jewishness may have served in their growth as a way of relating themselves to a group and culture from which they have drawn strength and a sense of world fellowship. Others may have projected upon their Jewishness all of the difficulties inherent in growth. Some may have had to deny the difference inherent in their being Jews. For some, who haven't been able to deny that difference, but yet cannot fully accept it, Jewishness may constitute a source of insecurity and anxiety. Others still may have to use Jewishness as a protection from the world about them and overvalue it or flaunt it. Whatever the meaning of being Jewish to the individual client, coming to a Jewish agency tends to bring it into focus. His

reaction to Jewishness colors his reaction to the Jewish agency and affects any relationships he experiences with the social workers who are the representatives of that agency.

Whatever his reactions, the client's experience with the Jewish agency is an experience in Jewishness. In our complex culture, it is in the total of such experiences, whether with individuals, organizations, religious activities, groups or social agencies, that the individual experiences Jewishness. In a sense, the Jewish social agency, therefore, in addition to whatever service it is set up to render, offers too the opportunity for a Jewish experience. It is interesting, in a community where many Jews live in predominantly non-Jewish neighborhoods, how many clients express appreciation for this experience directly. They find in it a means of relating themselves to the Jewish community.

For clients from mixed marriages, the problem of relating to the Jewishness of the agency differs according to the degree that they have related and accepted the heritage of their marital partners. Some may find it difficult to use a Jewish agency which in a sense implies affirmation of Jewishness. Some Jewish clients with non-Jewish marital partners, desiring to use the agency, meet considerable resistance at home. Often, too, non-Jewish clients with Jewish spouses, find in the experience of coming to a Jewish agency a means of relating with the group into which they have married. As one such mother exclaimed when asked about coming to a Jewish agency, "I have trouble getting to my son. Jewishness is one thing he does have respect for. Perhaps with your help I can get to him." Similarly, Jews married to non-Jews and living in a predominantly non-Jewish neighbor-

hood, find in their experience with the Jewish agency a means of identifying themselves with the group from which they have come. It has been interesting, for example, in our intake activities for a Jewish camp, to note how many parents of mixed marriages seek in such a camp experience for their child a way of relating her to their own heritage. A Jewish wife of an Italian expressed this: "We have brought up Rosalie to be proud of both her Italian background and her Jewish background, to reply to children who taunt her, that in being Italian-Jewish she has more than if she were either alone. We live in a predominantly Italian neighborhood where Rosalie is the only part-Jewish child. We want her to go to a camp where she can be Jewish too and know other Jewish children."

In coming to a Jewish agency with a problem, the client brings that problem in a sense to the Jewish community. Some clients find in that security and support. They have the feeling that they will be understood and helped since they are comfortable in its Jewishness. Their own guilt at having a problem and seeking help with it may be lessened in the feeling that the Jewish community, through the Jewish agency, accepts that problem and is willing to help with it.

For other clients, coming to a Jewish agency may be threatening since it means disclosing their problem to people who may know them and possibly sit in judgment over them. There can be a real fear that the Jewish community standards will be applied in evaluating their problem or behavior. This feeling, perhaps in reverse, was expressed vividly by a Catholic client who when asked why she had come to a Jewish agency for help with her problem re-

plied: "If I went to the Catholic agency, I might meet someone I knew. And I wouldn't want that." For perhaps the largest group of clients the emotions are mixed, both the sense of security and the threat. The worker in a Jewish agency should be aware of such feelings as they are expressed in the relationships with clients and be prepared to deal with them.

In illustration of how attitudes towards the Jewishness of an agency are expressed and dealt with, some very brief excerpts from the case of Mrs. Samuels* are presented.** Only those aspects of the case material are given which relate to the problem under discussion.

Mrs. Samuels was referred to the agency by the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies which she had found by looking up "Jewish" in the phone directory. When she came in, she told the worker that she had been to several agencies recommended by various people and had felt that she couldn't get any help in any of them. Her 28-year-old son was unhappy and frustrated. He had no friends and was like a stranger to the family. He hated particularly his younger brother who was successful while he was a failure. He had been unable to work at all during the past year. Although psychiatric help had been offered him, he refused absolutely to cooperate. In describing this agency the worker explained that we were Jewish. Although the worker could not guarantee that we could help her, Mrs. S. said: "Somehow I feel this is the right place. I don't know why but I have confidence in you." After she had

* All identifying information is modified.

** The worker in this case was Mrs. Isabelle Stone Hofstein, who at the time was Associate Supervisor, Family Service, JCS—O-N.

spoken with the social worker about the kind of help we could give in such a situation and what was involved in that help, she wanted us to see Julius and agreed to tell him about us. Julius called to arrange an appointment in response to the worker's letter. Coming in a half hour late, and remaining only fifteen or twenty minutes, he was suspicious, guarded, and withdrawn. He was interested but did not respond when the worker, in describing the agency to him, told him that this was a Jewish agency established by the Jewish community through the Federation. The only thing he could ask for, and that only on leaving, was a list of "Jewish psychiatrists in Queens." The worker replied that she could not give him such a list but explained that we did have a psychiatric service within the agency. He reluctantly agreed to think about whether he wanted to use our service and said that he might call. Mr. and Mrs. S., seen later by the worker, described how Julius' behavior was breaking up their home and pleaded for our help, adding: "Somehow we feel you are our only salvation." The worker again wrote to Julius, wondering whether he was still interested in discussing our help further. He called again for an appointment, came in late and said, "I guess I want to see your psychiatrist." When the worker challenged him about his desire for help because of the way he had responded, he reasserted his desire for help but added: "I have heard that people with neuroses did not want to be cured."

During the next six-week period he was seen several times to discuss his problem in using psychiatric help provided by the agency. During this period some change in him was noted. He found a job and began to pay a fee for

his case work interviews. It was only at the end of this period that he could tell the worker what he felt was the essence of his problem. At that point he remarked: "I can't seem to get along with people my own age—especially girls—especially Jewish females." The worker asked whether the fact that she was a woman and Jewish made it hard for him to talk with her. In his discussion of that, he brought out his feeling that Jewish people were more sensitive to feelings. Because of that they might understand him more and could help him better. It was that in a sense which made it possible for him to come back to the agency which he had initially distrusted because his mother had come here first. He felt that here we could help him come to grips with his problem. His attitude towards the worker now changed markedly. In contrast with his initial distrust and detachment, he related more normally to her, talked freely with her and worked actively on plans for obtaining psychiatric treatment. Until now he had not even been talking to his parents, but now he could confide to his mother his desire to be helped and his plan to see the agency psychiatrist. At this time, with his appointment with the psychiatrist scheduled, he has arranged to take time from work and agreed to paying the regular agency fee for the examination.

It is evident from this material that no worker, whether Jewish or non-Jewish, without considerable case work skill could have helped this family. Jewishness cannot be a substitute for skill and understanding. Knowledge of Jewish content, understanding of the meaning of Jewishness for others, and an identification with and pride in Jewishness of the worker alone do not constitute good case work. A basic psy-

chological and social understanding combined with good case work skill is necessary for case work in a Jewish agency as well as any other type of agency. Given a worker with that equipment, the additional elements of Jewishness may add to her sensitivity and helpfulness to Jewish clients. There can be little question that, in the case of Mrs. Samuels, the fact that the agency and the worker were Jewish had considerable meaning for both the parents and for Julius. The worker's awareness of that meaning and use of it throughout the case constituted an important element of her skill.

In this brief paper we have examined some of the implications of "Jewishness" for the Jewish social agency. Without attempting to define precisely what was the meaning of "Jewishness," we have pointed out that Jewish agencies have in common their relationship to the Jewish community, their source of funds, the group of clients seeking their help, and their common origins in Jewish history and philanthropy. It

is these common factors which differentiate the Jewish from the non-Jewish agency. For agency workers and clients this difference does have significance. The reaction of both to Jewishness is affected by the meaning Jewishness has had for them as individuals. Coming to the Jewish agency, can constitute an experience with Jewishness. If the Jewish social agency is to provide the most effective help possible, it must examine and deal with the meaning of Jewishness for itself, for its staff, and for its clients. The agency should take responsibility for incorporating its relation to Jewishness into its basic policy. The worker of the agency, representing the agency and through it the Jewish community, should understand and cope with the manner in which the Jewishness of the agency affects his relationships with clients; should both use the positives and recognize and cope with the problems inherent in the agency's Jewishness. To deny or ignore the agency's Jewishness and the differences inherent in that is to deny reality.