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# Retrospection, Prognostication, and Innovation: A Conversation With Jerry and Ruby Bubis

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In his memoirs, *Guide Yourself Accordingly*, Jerry Bubis describes his 1968 journey across America, charged by Alfred Gottschalk, then president of the Hebrew Union College-Institute of Jewish Religion (HUC-JIR), to define the character and shape the school dedicated to the training of Jewish communal professionals.

The historic commitment of Hebrew Union College to this venture of constructing a communal service program did not emerge from the sociocultural shifts of the 1960s. Rather, Isaac Mayer Wise spoke of it in the 1870s, and in 1913 in partnership with Cincinnati's United Jewish Charities and the University of Cincinnati, HUC-JIR established the first such training initiative, although limited in terms of its years of service.

In the late 1960s, as Jerry would discover, the School of Jewish Communal Service (SJCS) would be a school for its time. Just as it was the time of the opening of the American experience to all of its citizens, that period in Jewish history has been described as the age of the greening of American Jewry. Jews had then come to understand that, out of the anguish of the Holocaust and the triumph of Jewish nationalism, a new communal agenda would now be shaped.

From the outset, Bubis constructed a set of core competencies that would remain central to SJCS's mission: knowledge of Jewish history, text, and practices; an understanding of the core intellectual ideas of the 19th and 20th centuries; a capacity to perform key functions in planning, budgeting, and fund development; appropriate management and organizational skills; an abiding commitment to Israel; and Hebrew-language competency. Similarly, his insistence on original research with the creation of a thesis requirement and the introduction of the infamous logs would challenge students to question core assumptions, think originally and creatively, and value research.

SJCS could not have been formed at another time or place. Its uniqueness is in part tied to the creative genius of Jerry Bubis that enabled him to assert that this was the appropriate environment in which to build a communal program. And complementing this new energy would be a willing academic partner, the University of Southern California. What would emerge between HUC and USC

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would come to be a unique intellectual and institutional arrangement within higher education.

As the school marks its 40th anniversary, we engaged in a conversation with Jerry where we explored his uncanny ability to forecast trends and changes in Jewish professional and communal life, probed the thinkers and leaders who continue to mold and inspire him, and, by way of this journey, attempted to capture the essence of one of the leading visionaries of our time, Prof. Gerald Bubis. With a delightful set of commentaries provided by his bride of 60 years, Ruby, it is with deep honor that we share these treasures with you.

**Q: At the moment you were initially engaged to establish this school, what were some of the core challenges you encountered?**

**A:** First, I have to clarify the words “initially engaged,” because once I got hired, President Alfred Gottschalk gave me a year off to study. That’s an important preface. Otherwise, you’re looking at a guy who worked in Jewish centers and was active nationally in the conference (now the Jewish Communal Service Association) and so forth; but I didn’t have a worldview and I certainly wasn’t thinking about the profession in a macro sense.

That year of study gave me a growing sense of the possibilities and complications. I started by going to various archives trying to find material on prior communal service programs, such as the Kehillah that had been established in New York, and the original program created by HUC in Cincinnati, and there was almost nothing. The only place that had any real documents was with the Training Bureau that had been established for a period of time in New York in the 1940s.

The first thing I got out of that search was an appreciation of how the field, as a whole, and, more specifically, the academic part of the field had a limited sense of its history. I learned a great deal that year in relation to the question of whether such a school could survive and if such a training program would be needed. I also made a resolve, which was that I would keep everything. So that if ever there was somebody who wanted to look back and say, what was this thing we created, where did it come from, how did it evolve, the records would be in place. When I retired in 1989, I gave the American Jewish Archives 90 linear feet of files, and I’ve subsequently added another 20 feet or so.

This is a preface to saying that I came to appreciate things in a much different way, as a result of that year, that gift which I was given, to travel the world to interview professional and lay leaders—not just study but to interview and conceptualize.

**Q: Ruby, when Jerry came home, that first day, after Alfred called him with the offer to create the school, what did you think at the time?**

**Ruby:** I was thrilled. If someone up in Heaven tried to make the perfect job for Jerry, this was it. I don’t think that Jerry realizes everything he has done. He has been a teacher throughout all of his life. In a little camp that he directed in Minneapolis, Jerry created this theme of “Positive Judaism”! And it carried right through, and with the staff of young college kids who picked this up from him, and they ran with it. Because it was so clear, it had such meaning. So Fred [Alfred Gottschalk] came along... And don’t forget, Jerry had walked out of a job in

Long Beach and had nothing waiting for him; and took this temporary job. So Fred was like an angel that someone had sent from heaven. And I just thought this was good and it was.

**Q: Give us a sense of the thinkers who inspired Gotschalk's dream for the school?**

**A:** He was an Ahad Ha-am-nik; his doctoral dissertation was about Ahad Ha-am. His major writings were about Ahad Ha-am. Also, you must look at his [Gotschalk's] background—coming out of a yeshiva and German background—and moving out into the world, he was very much affected by the teachings of Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan.

**Q: What were the cultural or institutional boundaries or problems that you faced early on after the initial forming of the school?**

**A:** Look, I came to develop the school because I had these discussions with President Gotschalk. I said to him, you keep saying you want a school that is going to serve the community. He made that very clear when he said to me, "That's why I hired you as a Conservative Jew." In our first class, Howard Charish was there and raised at the outset the issue of kashrut. And I wasn't shy about spending some extra money on kashrut, as I wanted to establish a principle. So I went to President Gotschalk, and said, "We are going to have to spend extra money on anybody who keeps kosher." President Gotschalk agreed, and the principle was established at the outset that this was going to be a community school.

Gotschalk's dream for the school was probably in place by 1964, when he engaged Bert Gold to conduct a feasibility study for a school—which I said neither was a real study nor demonstrated the feasibility of anything! I've said this to friends, and I'll say it again: The feasibility study was really a tool to back up the case for a school of communal service that Dr. Gotschalk had already asserted.

The timing helps explain the success of the school. If this school would have opened in 1966, instead of 1968, I don't believe it would have made it. Because by then [1969], the sensitivity and sensitizing of the Diaspora-Israel relationship had occurred, and Israel and all that it would come to represent were suddenly the communal norm. Timing in the fulfillment of a dream is a big variable.

**Q: Tell us about the thinkers who have most influenced you.**

**A:** I have been influenced on many levels by a number of people. On the personal level, my grandfather was my first role model. He was a modest observant Jew who owned a small bit of property with a few small stores and a few rental apartments. It was during the heart of the Depression. I learned he was secretly leaving food baskets at the tenants' doors who were also behind in their rent payments. He did other things which we never discussed but which I observed. I came to realize his actions had a powerful effect on me.

Rabbi Norman Frimer was head of Hillel at Minnesota after I returned to school following World War II. I came to be active in Hillel and was hired to be his program director. He was Orthodox and later served as Hillel's national director. He was a pluralistic Jew who believed in the right of people to be different from him. I learned to be less judgmental and was also exposed to Jewish learning

on an adult level. He introduced me to Kaplan's and Ahad Ha-am's writings. They both had a powerful effect on me in shaping my ideas about Israel and the Jewish people. Ruby and I used Kaplan's philosophies as a basis for our Jewish home, kashrut, etc. Studying with Rabbi Kaplan later was one of the highlights of my life; I still have my notes from his course.

In graduate school I was exposed to the teachings of Saul Alinsky, John Dewey, as well as those of William Heard Kirkpatrick on the power of community and the underpinnings for developmental action and experiences.

I had two unusual professors in graduate school. One of them was Gisa Konopka, who was an alienated Orthodox Jew from Germany. She had fought in the German underground after being released from a concentration camp in the late '30s. She had become a pacifist after coming to America. She was a powerful force in the field because of her writings and teachings. In our class shortly after the war, she brought former Luftwaffe pilots and other Germans to study social work with us, men who had been in the war. It was a powerful lesson in the belief of the redemptive potential of people and in being able to introduce and promote democratic values.

Ruby Pernell was my second-year field instructor as well as my professor. She was one of the first black professors in the field. She went on to become the first social work attaché at an American embassy when she served Ambassador Kenneth Galbraith in India. She later was the Grace Coyle Professor in Social Work Theory at Case-Western Reserve University in Cleveland.

My rabbi, Harold Schulweis, has been a teacher and friend since 1953. He has taught me much, and I consider myself to be his friend, colleague, and student to this day.

In addition, Abraham Joshua Heschel's writings have helped me sort out my Jewish stances and beliefs.

It's a long list, and I could go on with many more people. I would like to mention two more. Judah Shapiro showed me how to be a curmudgeon contrarian while loving Jews and the Jewish people. He gave me the insights which further confirmed for me how I might play some role in helping to shape the Jewish agenda and how precious dissent and debate were in helping to keep diversity alive. Shoshana Cardin sensitized me to the difficulties women had in being truly recognized and used in Jewish life.

I am not finished learning and being shaped; at least I hope such is the case. My bride Ruby permeates all that I have come to be, so she is ever present in this list.

**Q: Would you describe the shifts in leadership styles that you have seen in both lay and professionals during the course of your career? What have been the driving forces behind those shifts?**

**A:** Going back prior to my own career and looking at the literature such as it existed, one sees the role of lay people in the shaping of the community. So, the first observation would be that the lay person was the model for the professional rather than the other way around, in most cases. I think that is an interesting phenomenon.

And when you look through the only literature that exists, you have *Trends and Issues in Jewish Social Welfare*, and *The Turbulent Decades*, in addition to the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*. There has been no history written of this

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field. There have been very few biographies. The point that I am trying to make is that in the material one can uncover, you come to see the increasing role of the professional, starting, in my mind, in the 1920s.

And that was, I think, in many cases due to the graduate school of Jewish social work, which Felix Warburg underwrote. It started to train people who would over time have a long-term influence. When I came in the field as a young guy, those were the *Gedolim* [sages].

As I met such people, I didn't realize their background, but I came to see that these individuals, whom I came to admire, were graduates of that program. And, in turn, some of them were graduates of the Jewish Theological Seminary in their School of Education, who had been taught by Mordecai Kaplan. In addition, Kaplan taught lay people. In the case of a woman such as Miriam Ephraim, who was the first national woman of prominence in the field, her ideas were shaped by Mordecai Kaplan and the graduate school of Jewish social work.

Now—coming forward—when I came into the field, there were some powerhouse people who played national roles; none of them were the professionals. Among the lay people, these were some very powerful figures in Jewish life and in religious life. Not until the late 1940s were there professionals in my community of great consequence.

Only when I started to go to national meetings and heard these people and watched them work, did I come to see their styles of leadership and learn from them, albeit initially from afar. At that time there was the Conference of Jewish Communal Service, followed by the National Conference of Social Welfare; and I saw how these two entities bridged one another. So that affected me, tremendously, to see that if you were going to be in a sectarian work setting, you were making a very big mistake if you didn't understand that as a filter to the broader universe.

By the time I came in the field, the returning soldiers were able to take advantage of the GI Bill, which allowed them to enroll in graduate schools—an enormous number of men. These individuals entered the field of Jewish communal service, where they had in their hands the power to shape and envision the future of our communities. In turn, they were being encouraged by lay people.

Now, you ask about the changes. I think there was a golden age of Jewish communal work, which was pretty much the 1950s and the 1960s. This I believe occurred because there was an idealism that grew out of World War II, and that permeated the boards who were social liberals.

And who were those lay people? They were reflective; they were educated lay people; they had come out of the liberal political environment; they were also socialists and there were communists—they had the notion about “taking care of these people.” So their social role, now that I think of it, brought an ethos and an expectation that of course they would take care of the professionals.

**Ruby:** I'm going to interrupt you. I recall very, very clearly, your greatest disappointment was in the lack of “Jewish content.”

**Jerry:** That's one of the big changes. The universalism of the field was the norm. If you go look at the early articles, you see a tension that goes back—starting by the way, with an address by Rabbi Stephen S. Wise in 1908—where he berates the Jewish community workers for being parochial, and not extending their Jewish focus to include a more universal appeal.

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The big changes to me had to do with role delineation and the overt power of the professionals. So many of the people were social workers, and they were taught: *Be invisible*. Your goal was to disappear and not play a high-profile role. The whole notion of a charismatic social worker was an oxymoron.

**Q: How did you (Ruby) support Jerry and help him find the strength to persevere even when there were plenty of skeptics about “Jewish content?”**

**Ruby:** I knew the strength was within him; he didn’t take anything from me. No, that was one issue in which I played no role; that was Jerry. Jerry was highly influenced by his grandfather. And the negative influences and role models for both of us were our fathers. So he had this great big monkey on his back, or elephant. That quiet, quiet influence. Jerry is not quiet; you know when Jerry’s around. Even when he’s quiet, you know that he’s around.

**Q: When you speak about the golden age of Jewish communal service, I can’t help thinking, you mentioned very few women or issues related to gender roles?**

I never used the word “her” once, no. That’s right.

**Q: Would you reflect on how gender roles and gender assumptions have changed over the last 50 years and if you think or don’t think that it might have affected lay-professional relations and organizational life?**

**A:** Casework was on the direct service level and it was almost totally female. When the men came back from the war and then started to penetrate this field, which was a highly feminized field for everything except at the executive level, something changed.

There wasn’t sensitivity about that; none of us had any sensitivity. There was a woman named Florence Huttner, who was the director of the Toronto federation, who served as the only woman federation director, as far as I know, up until that time.

Upward mobility meant geographic mobility. You could not advance unless you left your city. And that’s one of the realities that nobody talked about, but which had a “stopper-in-the-bottle” effect. The woman who was married wasn’t going to drag her husband to another community; that simply wasn’t the normative thing to do.

The issue of gender roles first started with papers at the conference, and as usual, the ethos of the time permeates the Jewish community, as well as everywhere else. We weren’t sensitive about this; it just was not something that we thought about. There were women who were active in the Jewish communal service enterprise; most of them, in the JCC field. And yet, there wasn’t the drive to break the glass ceiling. It wasn’t as if the women were saying, “Let me in, let me in, let me in.” It simply didn’t happen.

**Q: What has surprised you over the breadth of your career—something that you might never have thought would either occur, change, or come into existence?**

Well this is one. The role of women in the field. Also, the role of the State of Israel. Certainly before 1967, I had never thought of the power and the impact of Israel upon people. In turn, what is surprising in the consequence of that is

the relatively conservative nature of the leadership in the system, in advocating for change, and even having the capacity to change. That surprised me a lot.

Steve Cohen and I did a study, which we made a terrible mistake about selling. We did a study on attitudes toward Israel among professionals; and the first thing we discovered is that they didn't know much. The second thing we discovered is they couldn't coalesce around a position other than the conventional thinking of the day. And that, to this day, is a big surprise to me. That the self-attitude of the typical professional is that they never think of speaking out. They don't take stands.

**Q: What do you think now are the desired skill sets and qualities of people who are going to work in the Jewish nonprofit sector? Which are the valued disciplines?**

Certainly fund development, to write well, and to communicate well. And to plan, plot, scheme, and think. The matter of communicating and distilling the essence of what you come to know, to the end that you can articulate it and encapsulate it in such a way that you transfer that thinking into an emerging visionary model that has a result.

**Q: What is the one thing you would change about your career, if you had it to do all over again?**

A: When I look back, I'll speak for Ruby and for me, we had a layering of experiences that became increasingly fruitful and adventuresome. I owe a lot to her for getting me into this field, in which I never saw myself remaining. As I reflect on it, my career opened such worldwide opportunities that I think we've had one of the richest lives, as compared with most people I know. Where we went and to whom we were introduced, I cannot think of another set of opportunities that we might have experienced. I know I've had all kinds of recognition, but those were like ex-post-facto outcomes of the goals we fulfilled.

**Ruby:** The only regret that I have, and our kids talk about this ad nauseam, was that he worked so damned hard, that he was rarely home with the family. There were very limited times when the kids knew that they or I needed him and that he was busy saving the Jewish people. So, that's the only regret.

**Q: When we reflect a bit about your life, it is about the movement forward, not necessarily an end point; tell us about that.**

A: This is the thing I'm going to try to talk about in *The Golden Boundaries* [the book that Jerry is currently writing], the whole notion of process leadership rather than charismatic leadership. And I remember how Rabbi Harold Schulweis would make so much fun of me: "you and your process." And yet, I just don't know any other way of doing the business of community, as it works for me.

**Q: Pretend for a moment that you have a magic wand; there was no worry about limitations of money or difficulties of politics, but you could create an entirely new communal frame. If you could have your vision of a kind of messianic age, so to speak, what would Jewish communal life look like?**

To begin with, I would wish for something a little more modest: a sense of the interdependent destiny of people who work for the Jewish people and through the Jews for the community at large. Leadership based upon the pocketbook would come to be much less central than it is now. Because I think that this has

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the seeds of destruction for the Jewish community. Elitism is narrow in its gains; it is narrower in its outlook, and it will in my judgment destroy the whole notion of community building.

I have been reading materials about Isaac Mayer Wise and Stephen S. Wise; they both understood that they were trying to create community, each in a different way, each in a different time, and each for a different purpose. They understood that their roles were related to the dream of community.

So my dream would be a more democratic and representative community, a more sensitive community, a more engaging community, and a community that did not create walls. And with reference to this idea, I am as fresh in my desire, hope, and expectation of the possibility that I can help to make this happen.

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The living legacy of Jerry Bubis can be found today in the more than 600 graduates of the School of Jewish Communal Service who on a daily basis act upon his vision and principles of communal practice. His 39 years of service and teaching provided a laboratory for testing out his ideas, and today many of the core elements of these best practices are considered to be the norm. Clearly, in his retirement and more directly through his writings, Jerry has extended his reach and impact, providing a more formal framework for presenting his personal and communal perspectives.

Jerry has always challenged his students not only with regard to their professional competencies but also with maintaining and exercising a set of leadership values. His audience was not only the classroom and the hundreds of students he would help to shape as future professionals but well beyond, reaching into the board rooms and retreat centers where he would challenge national Jewish leaders, local board members, donors, and staff professionals to rethink their mission, and message, and strategies.

In his teaching and his writings, he rejected stereotypical thinking in place of creative outcomes. He would write about "leadership grounded in values yet infused with competencies." For a professional to succeed, that individual would require effective communication and analytic skills. In our interview this theme is again evident.

Bubis demanded a level of competency not only of others but even more so of himself, as reflected by the scope of his writings. This trait can be seen most clearly in the way he presents himself. As his comments above would suggest, Jerry holds to the value of communal process over charismatic or elitist behavior.

His marriage of 60 years to his dear bride Ruby reflects the other significant piece of Jerry's life. Their love for one another and the enduring support he received from her made this enterprise more than Jerry's story but in fact their collective venture. We very much felt this passion and shared commitment during our time with them for this interview.

Few people have occasion to influence the thinking patterns and affect the professional conduct of so many individuals while also shaping institutional culture and practice. Over the course of more than 50 years of service to the Jewish people, Jerry Bubis has achieved this level of personal engagement and connection with community leaders, his colleagues, and most certainly with his students, and we collectively are all the beneficiaries of his rich life and his extensive contributions to our field.