

RELIGION AND SOCIAL WORK IN THE NORTH-AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY

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BEFORE attempting an analysis of the rabbinate and its reaction for Jewish social work in contemporary America, it is necessary to describe North-American Jewish life briefly. The American Jewish community, like the over-all community, is becoming increasingly secularized. Jews are concentrated in urban centers, and lately, in suburban groupings. Wherever Jewish people settle, they lose almost all their working class members, and become middle and upper middle class in orientation. They gravitate towards white-collar, business, and professional occupations almost to a man. Jewish people living in America are becoming so fully acculturated that they are often indistinguishable from their non-Jewish neighbors.¹

Certain aspects of this rapid acculturation of American and Canadian Jews have become matters of general concern. Inter-marriage rates, although not particularly high yet, are on the increase. A large number of Jews have no affiliation with Jewish institutions; and many Jews purchase seats in synagogues or halls only once a year, for the High Holy Days. As a matter of fact, Jewish activi-

ties center around the synagogue primarily in the smaller communities, often because the synagogue has the only meeting facilities of the area.

On the whole, few religious leaders are happy with the recent increase in synagogue memberships, suspecting that such increases suggest a desire for non-theological services and for social identification rather than a religious revival. A decline of learning and scholarship, even among the rabbis, has been admitted and recognized.² Rabbis have been critical of themselves too, fearing that the business of their large-scale ministries is bustling them right out of spirituality.³ Some rabbis feel that middle-class Jewish people, when faced with personal difficulties, are turning to mental health workers more often than to a pastor.

Religious Developments in the North-American Jewish Community

Secularization and acculturation of American Jews has gradually but unavoidably lessened the centrality of the

² M. Freedman, *Commentary*, 12 (1951), 307, 313; C. Handlin, *Commentary*, 18 (1954) 305; and S. Hayes, *Program Aids*, Montreal: Canadian Jewish Congress, 1954, 6.

³ *Central Conference of American Rabbis*, New York: American Jewish Committee, 1950, 371.

¹ A. G. Duker, *Emerging Culture Patterns*, New York: Jewish Education Committee, 1950, 6, 20, 24, 30.

rabbi and of the synagogue in the Jewish community. As Jewish people turn to mental health and social welfare avenues of help, rabbis have either withdrawn into defensive over-sensitivity, learned the insights of human growth and development, thrown themselves into mental health and welfare activities on the lay level, brought social workers into the synagogue as colleagues, or formed working relations with the social worker and psychiatrist whom they once held in contempt or distrusted.

Developments within American Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reform tend to confirm the above. Fear of assimilation has caused a return to Jewish traditionalism, even in the ranks of Reform Judaism. All three denominational affiliations have taken steps to modernize their synagogue programs, and have instituted many non-ecclesiastical services in order to help Jewish people identify with the synagogue.

American Orthodoxy is plagued by internal competition and lack of unity, especially since it has been the most damaged by acculturation and secularization of its American-born members. Orthodoxy is further handicapped by an inadequate program of public relations in the English language. However, there are a number of matters still common to all Orthodox groups.

Orthodoxy, especially of the European type, tries to remain as close as possible to traditional beliefs and observances, adhering faithfully, for example, to the dietary laws. God is the sole Creator and Guide of the universe, is eternal, knows man's every deed and thought, will send His personal Messiah, and will cause an ultimate resurrection of the righteous. He is absolute Unity, has no body or material form, yet is the individual Jew's personal Deity. The Orthodox Jew may pray thrice daily in the Hebrew tongue, does not work on the Sabbath, and is rewarded or punished in

the next life for keeping or transgressing God's commandments during the present one.⁴ He does not feel his life circumscribed or frustrated by God's many commandments. The latter are rather a concrete embodiment of a worthy way of life, an expression in deeds of one's faith and trust. Nor do these commandments require the Jew to live an ascetic life. He is instructed to enjoy the pleasures of this world, to eat well, to marry and have children, and to bless God for making these pleasures available to man. Parentally arranged marriages are not unknown, nor is it uncommon for the Orthodox Jew to consult his rabbi about undergoing an operation or moving to a predominantly gentile area for reasons of health.⁵

The above paragraphs describe what might be labelled "European Orthodoxy." There exists another general faction best delineated by such terms as "Modern" or "American-oriented" Orthodoxy. The latter are unwilling to dismiss or overlook the influence of day and place. Services have become modernized, use of vernacular is more common, prayer books are standardized, and women are not expected to sit apart from men. An English-speaking, if not American-born and educated rabbi is engaged, and he seldom wears a beard. The congregation is interested in such matters as recreation and aesthetics rather than preoccupied with prayers and religious studies, and it pays little heed to such theological considerations as the coming of the Messiah. Religious school, Sunday school, adult education, youth activities, congregation socials, men's clubs, sisterhood meetings, Sunday morning breakfast and discussion groups, and the like, show how thoroughly some elements

⁴ Judaism, *Life*, 38 (June 13, 1955), 107-110.

⁵ *Socio-Cultural Elements in Casework*, New York: Council on Social Work Education, 1953, "Mr. Levy," 4:16, 19.

of American and Canadian Orthodoxy have attempted to meet the changing needs and tastes of their members.

Bulletins of one of Toronto's Modern Orthodox synagogues show all the above tendencies. The current trend is towards securing youth center facilities. A youth center is to be built as a wing of the present structure because "a synagogue has to be something more than a house of worship . . . , to endure it has to be a living communal center in the great tradition of Jewish history, serving the high purposes of divine worship, religious education, and social recreation." A recent meeting of the Young Couples Group conducted a panel discussion on "The First Years of Marriage."⁶ In another bulletin, an injunction to contribute to charity as a sign of "repentance and prayer" for the High Holy Days is flanked by a reminder to get reservations for the Brotherhood's opening dance. In yet another bulletin, one page reminds members to come to the weekly lesson in Talmud, and another offers prospective glee club members "short hours, no pay, but oh what fun and sense of accomplishment."

Reform Judaism, since it evolved in nineteenth-century Germany, has departed substantially from Jewish traditionalism. Liberal, Progressive, or Reform Jews do not hold to the dietary laws, have emphasized Friday night services over those of Saturday morning, have done away with the daily prayers, do not cover the male head during worship, use very little Hebrew in their services, and employ an organ during the prayers. Their prayer book contains many new prayers composed in English, makes no mention of a personal Messiah, does not include prayers for the re-establishment of the Temple in Jerusalem, and expresses no desire to

⁶ *Shaarei Shomayim Bulletin*, Toronto: June 1954, 1, 4.

return to Zion. Liberal Jews do not feel that the dispersion of the Hebrews from Biblical Palestine was either an exile or a punishment. Their approach to Scripture is critical rather than literalistic. They believe in immortality of the soul but not in resurrection.⁷ They do not insist that men and women sit separately in the synagogue, nor do they object to a mixed choir for the services.

Reform synagogues, like the Orthodox ones in this regard, are equally active in non-ecclesiastical fields. The 1952 Central Conference of American Rabbis was informed concerning a successful two-day institute on "a number of topics dealing with theoretical aspects of religion and psychiatry, and the practical insights pertaining to childhood, adolescence, group relationships, and marriage."⁸ A liberal rabbi was Scout chaplain at the "World Jamboree held last summer in Australia." Reform rabbis sponsored a national conference concerning marriage and the family, sent representatives to the Conference of the National Council on Family Relations, sent greetings to the National Catholic Family Life Conference, and advised the magazine *Newsweek* with regard to its article on "Divorce in America."

It is worth observing that the Free Synagogue of New York had a social service department for many years. This department sought to relate the synagogue's activities to the needs and resources of the community, and to further social causes. Rabbi Goldstein, long active in this social service department, wrote that he always believed "that synagogues and Jewish centers share much more in common with each other than either has been willing to ad-

⁷ Gordon, *Jews in Transition*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1949, 73-75.

⁸ *Central Conference of American Rabbis*, 165.

mit. They are really partners and not competitors."⁹

Reform Judaism is coming to the realization that "without Torah there will not even be charity." The continuance of any Jewish tradition, it now argues, should not be allowed to depend upon anti-Semitism or upon the development of more Jewish social agencies. Only Judaism is a meaningful basis for Jewish survival. Reform leaders are ready to cooperate with other denominations of Judaism and with the Jewish social agencies in the interest of Jewish survival, and are gradually returning to a more traditional theological position in the process.

Conservative Judaism is a product of the twentieth century. It is not so far from tradition as is Reform, but rather tries to reconstruct particular traditions in order to dissociate them from ghetto life and give them modern significance.¹⁰ Its theological position and religious practices therefore vary considerably, falling somewhere between the two extremes of Orthodoxy and Reform. Interestingly, Conservatism is equated with half-Reform by all of Orthodox Jewry. The latter look upon it as differing both in kind and degree from the Orthodox Jewish tradition.

The United Conservative Synagogue of America, representing over 450 congregations throughout Canada and United States, "seeks to make Judaism a living spiritual influence in the lives of the congregants. To this end, it provides specific cultural and organizational aids to its affiliated congregations." The national office of the Conservative synagogue includes such departments as Adult Jewish Studies, Youth Activities,

⁹ Goldstein, *The Synagogue and Social Welfare*, New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1955, 47-48, 54-61, 99.

¹⁰ Karpf, *Jewish Community Organization in the United States*, New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1938, 51.

Teen-Age Activities, Marriage and the Family, and Small Communities. There are also the National Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs, Young People's League, United Synagogue Youth, and National Association of Synagogue Administrators.¹¹ A 1953 session of the Institute for Religious and Social Studies conducted a course on "Religion and Social Welfare." A university of Judaism has been organized in Los Angeles, with the intention of offering courses to "rabbis, educators, social workers, and laymen desiring to pursue advanced studies in Hebraica, Judaica, and technical fields associated with their special interest in Jewish work."

The education of a Conservative rabbi is revealing. Prerequisite to admission to the Seminary are courses in social sciences, psychology, philosophy, and history. A fourth year course, "Practical Theology," deals with:

Areas served by the rabbi: ministering to sick and other pastoral activities; procedures at weddings, funerals, and unveilings; Bar Mitzvahs and other family occasions in the synagogues; adult education; practical law; worship; junior synagogues; young people's groups; the conducting of lectures; public relations; the rabbi and the Rabbinical Assembly; the rabbi's relationship to the Jewish and non-Jewish organization in the community; the rabbi and nation-wide movements, such as relief organizations and Zionist activities.

The Seminary library contains a section on Social Work consisting of "5,000 books and many pamphlets in the fields of social science, education, psychology, and related subjects, much rare type-written material and some 144 bound typewritten theses."¹²

In line with the increasing desire that religion should become more central in the Jewish life of America, the rabbinical

¹¹ Jewish Theological Seminary of America, *Register*, New York: 1953, 131.

¹² Jewish Theological Seminary, *Register*, 120, 124, 27, 106.

schools have all expanded the scope of their work. Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform have joined together into the Synagogue Council of America, and this Council has begun to work with the National Jewish Welfare Board as well as to conduct courses in community services and problems for rabbis.¹³

In Vancouver, a Conservative rabbi has been participating in the deliberations of the Institute on Church and Social Welfare Service. His Modern Orthodox colleague was, in May of 1955, part of a panel of clergymen leading a public discussion on "Mental Health and Religion."¹⁴ Counterparts have been found for such social work concepts as acceptance, love, empathy, independence, helping people to help themselves, and the person-to-person helping relationship "in the ideas and teachings of Jewish tradition."¹⁵ In fact, such a rabbinical service as chaplaincy is now supported by the central philanthropic chest of the Jewish community in many large North-American cities.

Social Work Developments in the North-American Jewish Community

Although twenty-five years ago many social workers could see nothing "Jewish" in "Jewish social work," the picture has so changed that articles have been written on Jewish Content in Casework.¹⁶ The growing fear of disintegration of Jewish life and culture in North America has prompted laymen and clients to look for a "Jewish component" in the program and functioning of

¹³ *American Jewish Yearbook*, 149-150.

¹⁴ *Jewish Western Bulletin*, 23 (April 29, 1955), 8.

¹⁵ J. Schnitzer, *A Human Relations Center in the Synagogue*, New York: Columbia University Ed. D. Ms., 1953, 26.

¹⁶ W. Posner, *Cultural Factors in Jewish Social Service*, New York: Jewish Education Committee, n.d., 17-22; see also Karpf, *Jewish Community Organization*, 144-145.

Jewish social work agencies. Institutions charged with community organization duties—the Canadian Jewish Congress, for example—now feel themselves also directly concerned with the perpetuation of the Jewish heritage.

The Jewish Center Movement, represented by the National Jewish Welfare Board, has undergone a parallel development. The Jewish Community Center is no longer a settlement house for the underprivileged, run by disinterested personnel. It is now considered an institution dedicated to developing personality and Jewish identification, serving as a common meeting ground for all Jews, furthering the democratic way of life, and assisting "in the integration of the individual Jew and the Jewish group into the total community."¹⁷

Similarly, many new synagogues are of the community center type, with assembly hall, classrooms, club rooms, library, facilities for worship, a gymnasium, and often a day school. As rabbis are being educated in the skills and insights of social work, so Jewish center workers are expected to have positive Jewish backgrounds. In increasing numbers of synagogues, social workers of various degrees of skill and training are employed to satisfy the non-religious need of the membership. It is becoming more and more acceptable for the community center to run a recreation program in the facilities of the local synagogue. Both institutions are seen as "dedicated to the enrichment and creative survival of Jewish life in the American community."¹⁸

Developments in Toronto, Ontario, during 1955, followed the pattern that has just been outlined. The Canadian Jewish Congress co-sponsored with the Jewish Community Center (Y.M.

¹⁷ H. A. Eigen, *JWB Circle*, January 1955, 3.

¹⁸ D. M. Goldenberg, *Jewish Social Service Quarterly*, 31 (1954), 237-239.

& Y.W.H.A.) such programs as a Maimondes Evening, an Institute of Jewish Studies, and a project on Music of the Shtetel. The local B'nai B'rith Youth Organization supervises the recreation program of Beth Sholom Synagogue, and Shaarei Shomayim Synagogue has approached the Y.M. & Y.W.H.A. for guidance with its youth activities. Jewish recreational and educational agencies, long rivals in the community for the youth's time, tried during 1955 to unite their efforts in the interest of approaching the Jewish child with a "homogeneous" and "whole" program.

Conclusion

It would appear that although the rabbinate has much in common with social work, fundamental areas of incompatibility cannot be denied. Two such areas are worth specific mention. No European Orthodox rabbi will ever be able to accept common-law-union as anything but prostitution. The very same rabbi is convinced that it is a sin for boys and girls to dance socially, in fact, even to hold hands. The social worker who is aware of these rabbinical convictions would not expect a European Orthodox religious leader to cooperate around the setting up of youth recreation services.

Many religious leaders would also hesitate to refer problems to a social worker which have traditionally been within the rabbi's competence and jurisdiction. Parent-child difficulties or marital complications—involving, as they do, the religious or spiritual aspect of a Jew's daily life—would not seem to need any other than pastoral assistance. The guilt, anxiety, loss of hope, ultimately "sin" that go along with unmarried motherhood or divorce might be referred to a social agency only with reluctance.

Moreover, if social workers are admitted to have unique and valuable skills or methods for helping troubled human beings, certain rabbis seem to prefer to

study and make use of these skills and methods themselves. If the rabbi feels he is not competent to deal with all types of social problems, he sometimes employs a social worker "colleague" at his synagogue in preference to sending the many social cases he encounters to an appropriate agency. He even seems to think sometimes of social services as a sort of sugar coating by means of which to retain or attract congregants. The rabbi may become active as a layman in certain social agency boards or committees, but he may still want to see social work done in the synagogue building rather than in social agencies. These rabbis sometimes think the social worker should simply supply them with whatever technical mental health information they need to help their troubled congregants.

On the other hand, a more thorough knowledge of the areas in which there can be cooperation should make for better working relations between rabbis and social workers. The latter must acknowledge that many troubled human beings still seek out pastoral help; and the former are faced with the fact that more and more of their congregants are seeking help from mental health resources. Where there has grown up a reciprocal familiarity with each other's convictions as well as a respect for one another's standards of practice, where "Jewishness" is sufficiently recognized, where there can be trust rather than rivalry, then cooperative work can be a reality. Most rabbis would not hesitate to refer to the correct social agency such problems as unemployment, mental illness, inadequate income, or immigrant's needs. Rabbis and social workers do work together in areas of golden-age recreation, adoption, vocational counselling, community-wide cultural affairs, and adult probation. It is becoming increasingly common for community center staff to run youth recreation programs in the buildings of Conservative and Reform

synagogues. We thus see that the rabbi and the social worker are beginning, as colleagues in the Jewish community, to work towards improving public understanding of the contributions which both religion and social work can make towards the betterment of the Jewish community.

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