

always makes a point of wearing her cross.

The increase in program time has also made possible the following new aspects of the Jewish Identity project: 1) Regular, as opposed to occasional contact is maintained with the Boys Transitional unit and regular contact is also maintained with two specialized foster group homes. 2) Weekly visits are now made to the Children's Service Center which provides elementary and high school education to children too disturbed to attend regular schools. My activities there involve participating in gym programs, talking to kids during lunch and recess breaks, and giving pre-Bar Mitzvah instructions. One hoped-for development which is slowly occurring is the extension of invitations by teachers to address their classes when there is an interface between the class subject and Jewish culture. 3) Another new activity which has great potential for expanding the impact of the project is a series of scheduled meetings with the Foster Parents Association. These meetings center around Jewish holidays. At Chanukah, for example, the holiday observances and history was explained. A discussion ensued about how the foster parents and children, not all of whom are Jewish, dealt with the potential Chanukah-Christmas conflict. 4) There has also started an involvement with the JCB Volunteer Program.

This then is the history of the Jewish Identity project. The Jewish Identity project has provided a wide range of Jewish experiences to significant numbers of children who were receiving little if any previously. It has also improved the quality of the Jewish experiences offered in some of the other areas of the agency which did have Jewish content in their programming. In this sense the project is a success.

Strengthening the Jewish Component of Jewish Communal Service

In recent years there has been increasing concern about the Jewishness of Jewish communal services. In the concluding chapter of their study of Jewish identification, Dashefsky and Shapiro noted that the social structure of the community is important for the maintenance and development of Jewish identity and that Jewish identity has a reciprocal effect on the nature of the social structure. They added:

If one wants to consider policy implications for strengthening Jewish identity and identification, then the most strategic point in this cycle is that of inter-personal relationships. What the Jewish community can do is provide the organizational and institutional context for the development and maintenance of these relationships.¹⁰

My experience as a rabbi with the Jewish Children's Bureau leads me to the conclusion that one can work for change most effectively when working inside the organization. If the specifically Jewish component of such communal services as children and family services, vocational services, community centers, etc. is to be improved, it might be helpful for there to be special resource people, such as specifically-trained rabbis or educators, working *within* these agencies. These resource people could provide information, as well as direction and coordination of agency efforts to increase Jewish identification among its staff and clientele. It is necessary to become personally familiar with the inner workings and personalities of the agency, its responsibilities, methods and procedures, its problems, as well as the clientele served. This complete familiarity together with full access to the agency can maximize the impact of American Jewry's rabbinic and educational leadership upon the Jewish character of Jewish communal services.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

Aliyah—A New Dimension in Center Programs and Services*

YITZCHAK DEKEL

Director, Adult Group Services, Jewish Community Center of Baltimore, Maryland

Aliyah therefore is a constructive way to keep Jews in the fold. The constructive and positive elements of Aliyah include: A choice to live a Jewishly more meaningful and stimulating life; to participate in the pioneering challenge of rebuilding the Jewish State, fulfilling a two thousand year-old dream; and an educated decision made on an individual basis.

Foreward

Following the November 10, 1975 infamous U.N. resolution denouncing Zionism as racism, 170 Jewish leaders representing 27 countries, met in Jerusalem for an emergency three-day summit conference, signing a pledge to help Israel to "fulfill its historic mission in the return to Zion". Only Abba Eban, former foreign minister, was more specific, urging American Jewry to "give us one-third of one percent in each year" meaning 20,000 *olim* (immigrants) instead of the average 5,000 annually during the last decade. On December 14, 1975, 120 Jewish community leaders and professionals were called to New York to meet Israel's defense minister, Mr. Shimon Peres, for the first meeting of the newly formed National Aliyah Council; the agenda: to increase *aliyah* from the U.S.A.

After 28 years of independence it is evident that Israel has failed to provide the ideological inspiration and the spiritual magnetism to attract substantial *aliyah* from the U.S., nor have the proper tools and structures been developed to attract Americans. These facts indicate a dire need for intellectual and professional reinforcement in Israel. This very professional and intellectual force exists within the American Jewish community.

George E. Johnson observes: "The needs of the State of Israel have increasingly shaped the work and reshaped the structure of the organized Jewish community. The fund-raising campaigns of local Jewish Federations have expanded their efforts on behalf of the State of Israel while at the same time helping

to transform Federations into the central funding and planning agencies of the local American Jewish community. Community relations councils also have gradually increased their activities in local communities, explaining the problems and needs of Israel to the Jewish and general public. Given the central role Israel plays in both the politics and culture of American Jewish life, it is somewhat paradoxical that *aliyah*—emigration to Israel—continues to be a fringe phenomenon, involving yearly about one-tenth of one percent of the American Jewish population, and is virtually ignored with but few exceptions by the wide range of Jewish organizations and institutions. It is all the more curious inasmuch as the Return to Zion has been a central motif in Jewish life for two thousand years, and a high priority of the State of Israel and the Jewish Agency, the major beneficiary of fund-raising efforts in the United States. The late Pinchas Sapir, then Chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive, told the annual Assembly of the Jewish Agency last June (1975) that Israel must double its present population in order to have peace and security.¹

The Objective

In essence, this proposal calls on the leadership of the organized American Jewry to accept the historic challenge and assume the major responsibilities concerning *aliyah* and its complex professional, ideological and material machinery. Such *aliyah* has to come in substantial numbers from America, in the order of about 50,000 *olim* a year. If not, Israel may not survive to celebrate its 50th

* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Boston, May 31, 1976.

¹ George E. Johnson, *Analysis No. 53*, Nov. 1975.

anniversary. Unmistakably, the Jewish community centers are the best structural, professionally staffed and trained organizations, with the widest geographical spread, to accept *aliyah* as a newly added dimension in their programs and services not only in relationship to their own membership, but also to pioneer and carry the message to the total Jewish community in America. As suggested later in this proposal, *aliyah* spells survival for segments of the American Jewry as well as it does for Israel.

"As the traditional bases for Zionist activity have substantially eroded, new bases seem to be developing. According to a number of Israel *aliyah* Center *shlichim*, the newer lay leadership in local Federations, the Young Leadership of the United Jewish Appeal, and various Jewish community leaders are more sympathetic to American *aliyah* than was the previous generation of leaders. Perhaps the most significant example is the effort being made to foster *aliyah* programming and counseling in the Jewish community centers. In January, 1975, after discussions with Pinchas Sapir, the National Jewish Welfare Board approved an extensive resolution declaring that Centers should take a more active role in providing staff knowledgeable and available to serve Jews considering *aliyah*, facilities for *aliyah*-oriented programs, and other services for people interested in *aliyah*. Starting with the fall of 1975, the employment contracts of Israeli *shlichim* employed by Jewish community centers contain reference to an agreement among the Center, Jewish Welfare Board, American Zionist Youth Foundation and the *shaliach*, that one of the *shaliach's* responsibilities will be "to help implement the JWB statement regarding *aliyah* by providing information and interpretative programming." Prior to this year, the mandate of community center *shlichim* stopped short of active promotion of *aliyah*.²

Innate Problems

No doubt, this proposal arouses instant questions, negative reactions, and outright resentment for numerous reasons. If nothing

² *Ibid.*

else, on the surface it seems that:

1. Encouraging and promoting *aliyah* is in direct contradiction of the Center's purposes and goals and the self-interest and growth of the American Jewish community. We must remember that the American Jewish community was already established, organized and growing when the first Zionist Congress met in Basel in August 1897. Thus America was for millions of Jews a genuine haven and a promising land before political Zionism became a recognized and well-organized movement. This historical fact has been crucial in determining the state of mind, ideology and self-perceptions of American Jews. The genuine Americanization of millions of Jews is best expressed through the viable and complex structures of American Jewish congregations, organizations, agencies and institutions that are by nature and purpose self-perpetuating.

2. Officially and openly to support and incorporate *aliyah* into the organized communal work and life of American Jewry is to do something that seems to be alien to good American citizenship and patriotism.

3. *Aliyah* may be perceived as threatening the numerical viability of the American Jewish community (yet at least 50,000 American Jews if not twice as many intermarry every year).

4. Why should the Centers be singled out to do the job?

5. How could the Centers accept the *aliyah* challenge and do the job?

6. Within the organized American Jewish community we encounter ideological, programmatic and operational duplication and even rivalry among organizations, while working simultaneously for Jewish survival. An obvious conflict is apparent between seemingly irreconcilable fund-raising and *aliyah* when they are mentioned in the same breath. Israeli *shlichim* have indicated this often, in anger and frustration. While they promote *aliyah* in a community, accentuating the opportunities in Israel, the challenges and promise it presents, U.J.A. speeches and posters portray in dark colors the economic plight and social problems in Israel. Why

should people be attracted to such living conditions?

7. Youth and the aged seem to be drawing most of the Centers' attention and funds presently. However, the *aliyah* challenge can become an invigorating undertaking because of its absolute importance for Jewish survival. It can assume dimensions of unprecedented magnitude for the Center field and professionals.

Before we deal with those crucial questions we must remember that the ultimate Zionist fulfillment and self-realization are through *aliyah*. *Aliyah* from America is therefore extremely sensitive, especially in light of the great and positive Jewish-American experience.

Inherent In *Aliyah* is The Survival of Both Communities

We are confronted by two socio-historical propositions: (1) Israel will not survive without doubling its Jewish population within the next two decades; and (2) The American Jewish community may not be able to slow or reverse its accelerated process of secularization-assimilation, thus growing smaller every year.

As to Israel's demographic problems, two factors are to be noticed: (1) At the end of 1973 non-Jews in Israel, most of them Moslem Arabs, constituted 15 per cent of the population. The natural population growth of non-Jews is much quicker than that of the Jewish population. Distribution of population by age groups for the end of 1972 reveals that the one to 29 year age group comprised 57.3 per cent of Jewish population, but 70.1 per cent of non-Jews. This measures the extent to which non-Jewish families have more children per family. In addition, there is a total Arab population of one million living presently under Israeli rule in post 1967 war boundaries. Irrespective of any solutions that may come about to the current political crisis, the demographic crisis is here to stay unless the Jewish population grows significantly through *aliyah*.³

(2) A recently released study of Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics notes that 40 per

cent of the Western *olim* of 5 years ago have left Israel, a figure similar to estimates of returning Americans.⁴

The Israeli press was recently filled with articles, commentary and letters to the editors regarding *aliyah* and *yerida* (emigration from Israel). Some Israelis feel that a free Jew in the diaspora who does not come to live in Israel is as "bad" as an Israeli who leaves the country. Why, writes a Mr. S. Ben Zvi from Haifa, is an Israeli who decides to emigrate, let us say to the U.S.A., considered to be a weakling, a traitor, a deserter (after having lived for many years in Israel) but a free Jew who lives securely elsewhere is someone we ought to respect and understand? It boils down to a simple choice of preferring the easier and better life outside of Israel.

As to the demographic problem of the American Jewish community, writes Dr. Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg: "...the diaspora, and especially the diaspora in the free world, which means primarily the American Jewish community, worries me greatly. The proposition that laboring for the survival and strengthening of Israel would preserve the Jewishness of world Jewry is true; but it is a partial truth. Significant elements of two generations which might otherwise have become completely marginal in their Jewishness have indeed been transformed by their attachment to Israel. But it is equally true that the attrition of the diaspora has not been checked. In the 19th century, wherever they lived in relative freedom, whether in New York or in Budapest, Jews of the third post-ghetto generation 'achieved' an intermarriage rate of 30 to 50 per cent. The overwhelming majority of American Jews are the descendants of the post-1882 immigration, which means that they are now in the third generation of American freedom. It is sadly true that despite the success of our pro-Israel endeavors, the rate of intermarriage today is of the order of 30 per cent. On present trends, the end of the

³ See *Facts About Israel, 1975*, published by Israel's Ministry of Information, pp. 70-73.

⁴ *Analysis No. 53, op. cit.*

diaspora is thinkable in the 21st century, and it is this awesome possibility which presents the largest single immediate Jewish problem."⁵

Aliyah therefore is a constructive way to keep Jews in the fold. The constructive and positive elements of *aliyah* include: A choice to live a Jewishly more meaningful and stimulating life; to participate in the pioneering challenge of rebuilding the Jewish State, fulfilling a two thousand year-old dream; and an educated decision made on an individual basis.

For one to promote emigration from the U.S.A. to Israel or actually to emigrate one's self is more complex and difficult than fund-raising. *Aliyah* involves choosing between competing priorities of Israel and the Jewish Agency (who need the American *aliyah* as well as the funds raised in America, while being the major beneficiaries of the funds raised) on the one hand, and the philosophies, feelings and communal agenda of the American Jewry that raises the funds, on the other. Historically, there were two sorts of *aliyah*: Idealists and refugees. Between 1880 and 1917 European Jewry found itself caught between pogroms, World War One and two Russian revolutions. During those years, tens of thousands of idealists went to Eretz Israel but millions chose the Americas and other shores. Similar trends repeated themselves before and after World War II. Recently, Russian Jews (a mixture of idealists and political refugees) don't opt for Israel exclusively either. Only the majority of the "rescued *aliyah*" from the Arab-Moslem world (North Africa and Middle East countries), about one million refugees, arrived in Israel since 1948. It is therefore difficult to visualize massive idealistic *aliyah* from the U.S.A. in the future.

Israeli programs (various tours and trips, studies in Israel, etc.) and programs on Israel in the Centers, are on the increase (especially since the Six-Day War) and are increasingly more accepted and incorporated into the Center's program. More and more Federations

⁵ Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, "Can The Diaspora Survive The Twentieth Century?" *Baltimore Jewish Times*, 12/12/75, pp. 28-51.

and Centers employ Israeli *shlichim* including *aliyah shlichim* and related services. In the last few years the Jewish Welfare Board as well as the Association of Jewish Center Workers have introduced staff exchange training programs with the Israeli Corporation of Community Centers, as well as sister Center programs and relationships. The Center field has an increased input into the professional guidance and training of the field in Israel.

"Much as American Jews have ready access to Israeli government and Jewish Agency leaders, but have little impact on the policies of the State, so Israeli leaders draw and inspire American Jews and their leaders, but have only a marginal impact on American Jewish life. Each community, while relying on the other, has set unarticulated but firm limits to the other community's influence in its own affairs. *Aliyah* may be the "responsibility" of the Jewish Agency and the Israel *Aliyah* Center, but it is largely controlled by the American Jewish community. Not only Federation leadership, but rabbis, educators, community councils, social workers and Zionist organizations are wary of the prospects of emigration of even a small percent of their constituencies and are reluctant to expose them to *aliyah* promotion. Although community center *shlichim* deal primarily with youngsters interested in the various short-term work and study programs in Israel, the realization by community centers that *aliyah* in fact has a constituency has done more than anything else to legitimate *aliyah*. The value of Israel programming in building Jewish identity for development of American Jewish leadership has led to an increase in the number of Israeli *shlichim*—beyond the Israel *Aliyah* Center—in local communities. Currently there are 24 Jewish community center *shlichim*, 11 Federation-funded *shlichim* operating out of Federations or Centers in the medium-sized Jewish communities, and five community *shlichim* in smaller Jewish communities. The fact that the majority of the *olim* has been to Israel at least once prior to *aliyah* suggests it is likely that such *shlichim* play an important role in the

stimulation of *aliyah*..."⁶

A Socio-Historical Note

As early as 1950, the late David Ben Gurion, then prime minister, said of American Jews: "We need their knowledge, their unrivalled experience, their spirit of enterprise, their bold vision, their know-how."⁷

Ben Gurion also observed, as many others did, that the establishment of the state is a beginning of a very long process of restoring and normalizing the Jewish people. As long as the majority of the people live outside their historic natural homeland, the condition of the Jewish people remains abnormal and problematic.

The leadership of American Jewry did not reverse its natural roles and relationship vis-a-vis Israel, nor did American Jewry's role in Israel decline or diminish since 1948. On the contrary, there is a constant growth in cooperation, mutual involvement and realization of the interdependence of both communities.

Like all Americans, more and more Jews are less and less religious, and Judaism assumes modern-secular-cultural dimensions of which the bond with Israel and a sense of historicity become the only conceivable substitutes for traditional religious practices.

Israel's Survival Depends on American *Aliyah*

As world conditions are today, in view of the Middle-East explosiveness, Israel's political and leadership problems in light of the internal Jewish-Arab relations, Israel's economic plight and its continuous military struggle for survival, Israel's needs are many and very critical. Billions of dollars are needed for defense, for immigrant absorption, social services and urban renewal. Israel lacks natural resources, but one resource that is badly needed more than anything else is that of manpower, of people. While American Jewry excelled in providing enormous political, moral, and financial aid to Israel since 1948, it failed to accept the simple challenge of mass *aliyah*. American Jewry is large, strong and

⁶ *Analysis*, No. 53, *op. cit.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

sophisticated. It is the largest, best-educated and wealthiest Jewish community that ever lived in any country in our entire history. The U.S. represents a promised land where millions of Jews enjoy freedom and security, fantastic opportunities and genuine love for a homeland. But no longer can an American Jew be content or morally at ease, by giving his fair share, or even giving a hurtful share, to the U.J.A., or by buying Bonds. These alone cannot guarantee Israel's survival.

"If anything, the appeal for American 'know-how' is even more direct today, with Israel actively seeking out American Jews with specific educational and professional skills needed to assist Israel's economic and social development. Yet the response to Israel's need for people stands in sharp contrast to the outpouring of financial contributions and political support."⁸

With Russia reneging on its promises and the Helsinki⁹ agreements, it has now become obvious that the only promising source of free Jewish immigrants is in the great U.S.A. itself a nation of daring pioneers and enterprising immigrants. Israel may not make it much longer without another one-half million Jews. What Jews? Where from? Whose job is it to bring about a sizeable constant flow of *aliyah*? The best *aliyah*? Whose historic responsibility is it and who is going to do it? The answer is almost embarrassing in its simplicity. The skills and tools are here, the sophisticated professionalism is here, the understanding is here. The will or the courage to move may be still weak or may be missing. This is part of the problem. Let us work on it. This challenge, if accepted, ought to be added to the Jewish community center programs and services, not replace any.

Why the Centers?

Historically, the Jewish community centers have been forerunners of all institutions in the absorption and acculturation to America of Jewish immigrants from Europe. Louis Kraft recalls¹⁰ how the YMHAs and the YWHAs

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ See Notes.

¹⁰ Louis Kraft, *A Century of the JCC Movement*, J.W.B., N.Y., 1953.

successfully assumed major roles in the process of community absorption of massive waves of Jewish immigrants that fled Europe between 1881 and 1914. Hence, the Center field does possess 100 years of cumulative proven expertise in Jewish immigrant absorption. Recently such roles have been utilized again as the Centers participate significantly in the process of absorbing Soviet Jews in the States. Such knowledge and expertise should be exported to Israel on a permanent basis or on loan, as part of an ongoing ever-expanding work exchange program. Two world wars and the depression in-between brought about revolutionary developments in the Center field. Social work as the dominant Center discipline evolved into a most distinguished Jewish-American profession, providing helpful services, aid and leadership to large segments of the Jewish community across the country every since. The Center field pioneered and organized projects for the Jewish and non-Jewish needy and social action programs and services for years. In sum, the Centers have established themselves Jewishly as the largest and best action-oriented agents in the country.

With some exceptions, Israel has been incorporated into the American-Jewish experience. However, the Center is almost the only place where it comes alive, in ongoing programs, workshops, forums, lectures and seminars, observances and celebrations. The most important factors singling out the Center as the most suitable organization to accept *aliyah* as a newly added dimension in programs and services, are the following undisputed facts:

1. It is the largest socio-cultural informal Jewish organization in America.
2. Its professional makeup and staff are best trained to deal with general community moods, needs and services.
3. The Center involves and serves more American Jews, coming from all walks of life and levels of Jewish knowledge and commitment, than any other Jewish organization or movement in the country.

4. The Center movement has the best possible geographic spread in the country reaching most Jewish communities in the States.

5. The Centers are best suited and able, through precedent, experience, modes and models of work with groups, to interpret, translate and disseminate new programs and ideas, such as *aliyah*.

How the Centers?

What does it mean to incorporate *aliyah* into the community centers in practical terms? What are the specific programs, projects, and services? What does it mean in terms of staff training and expected skills?

First comes the premise that the leadership of American Jewry must recognize the urgency for American *aliyah* and endorse it as a platform, as a policy. Next is the expectation that the Association of Jewish Center Workers accept the *aliyah* challenge and this proposal by creating the proper committees further to study, refine and recommend ways and means for implementing the proposal of *aliyah* as a newly added dimension to the Center programs and services. The following open-ended list offers several suggestions and projects that the Center movement can adopt almost immediately (some of it is already common practice) while assisting Israel and invigorating the Jewish dimension of the Centers:

1. "Export" or "loan" to Israel many more professionals who will study while working with the Ministry of Immigration and Absorption in Israel (in Ulpanim and Merkazei Klita-absorption centers); see the enlightening precedent established;¹¹ bring back the experience and knowledge gained and incorporate them into the various research and pilot projects concerning *aliyah*, to be implemented into staff training; counseling; educational programs, such as in working with youth councils, in summer camps, etc.
2. Have more qualified and highly trained Israeli *shlichim* come and work in the Centers

¹¹ "A Seven Month Volunteer Experience With Israel's Indian Jews." *JWB Circle*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (1976).

with emphasis on scholars and artists in residence who possess proven skills of training and education as well as tested proficiency in spoken English. Their job descriptions and expectations should be written out and agreed upon in advance.

3. Appoint a qualified staff member (knowledgeable and motivated) to staff and counsel local *aliyah* councils and *Chugei Aliyah*.

4. Have at least one staff member in every Center in the country become a liaison-committee member involved in one or more of the various study committees or sub-committees, to be established to study and research ways and means; goals and objectives; standards and procedures, etc. concerning *aliyah*.

5. Create the structure and relegate assignments on national and local levels to professionals to work on research and studies of the history and circumstances of *aliyah* to Israel and *yeridot* from Israel, while cooperating fully with the various Israeli authorities in order to obtain the needed data.

6. Research and study the pockets of Israelis living in the U.S.A. and develop outreach methods to communicate with them effectively, realizing that many of them are ideal potential *olim*.

7. Develop guidelines to define the range and nature of *aliyah* programs and services to be provided by the Centers; establish procedures for continuous evaluations of programs and services rendered.

8. In every community where there is a Center but there are no Zionist office and Israel-programs information services, the Center should become, through its own initiative and staff structure, the provider of such information-counseling, screening services to assist youth and adults in exploring structured visits, study and work in Israel, as well as arranging for referrals and some screening-orientation services for people contemplating *aliyah*.

9. The government of Israel and the leadership of the Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Organization should be requested to cooperate on the *aliyah* proposal as an endorsed platform. Such a statement of

program and purpose ought to include the awareness existing in the United States that Israel is nearing economic bankruptcy, ideological and spiritual exhaustion, and numerical deficiency, the only possible answer to which is a substantial increase in American *aliyah*. The processing and execution of such *aliyah*, from ideology all through to final absorption to be done the "American way."

The Beginning is Now

The Jewish-American Israeli partnership is not only one in which one can take pride, it also entitles American Jewry to make certain demands and claims on Israel, on issues, and policies concerning its future survival. The long established and accepted division of roles and responsibilities that existed for the last 28 years between the two communities, as a non-written historical contract, had a flaw; it evaded the issue of American *aliyah*. Now American *aliyah* becomes an imperative for Israel's survival. The highly respected and successful work done in the U.S.A. by the organized Jewish community on behalf of Israel, in the two vital areas of fund-raising and the political-legislative lobby, is a proof of American Jewry's commitment to Israel's survival. More important, it is a demonstrated proof of its ability to undertake the complex issue of increasing *aliyah* as a vital project and of doing an outstanding job, using its strength, methods and genius.

All needs (of Israel and of the potential *olim*), all standards, criteria, mechanisms and procedures, can and ought to be worked out by American Jewish professionals and experts, involving Israeli experts and Americans who made *aliyah*.

It has begun already with the Commission on Israel projects. It is essential to relieve Israel of the difficult and frustrating burden of "pushing" *aliyah*, under varied political and psychological pressures. While Israeli experts and officials have to be involved in the total process, the operation here in the States should be under the professional leadership of American Jews because only they will know how to cope with the conflicts of interests and

purpose that seem to arise from accepting *aliyah* as a major goal. It is unquestionable that such a reversal in roles and revolution in approach will substantially increase the number of Americans going on *aliyah*, and being absorbed more successfully. While this will

have a great positive impact on Israel, it will make hardly a numerical dent on the American Jewish community or on the Center membership. Can we escape such a challenge? Do we have the courage to ignore it?

The Jewish Community Center: A Group for Adolescents from One-Parent Families*

JERRY WOLKOFF

Teen Department Supervisor

and

DIANE APPLEBAUM

Social Worker

Samuel Field YM-YWHA, Little Neck, New York

One of the major foci of this...group has been to help these adolescents who have experienced the death or divorce of parents verbalize their feelings and work on the process of mourning. It is important to note that this mourning does not only occur with recent loss but often remains buried and festers over many years.

In recent years much has been discussed and published about the enormous increase in one-parent families. In New York State the number of children under eighteen living with only one of their parents has almost doubled since 1948. The Jewish family unit has also undergone similar patterns of change as evidenced by statistics on current membership coming out of the various Jewish community centers. On the average, "single-parent families are making up from 10 per cent to 25 per cent of total Center membership, and in some cases these figures may even be higher."¹ At the Samuel Field YM-YWHA we are currently reporting about 20 per cent of our teen membership as coming from one-parent families.

The "one-parent family" that is the subject of this article refers to the products of family breakup caused by parental separation, divorce, or death. Coincident with the increase in the number of such families has been a proliferation of special studies, books, articles and discussions trying better to understand this situation. Television, which for so many years perpetuated the myth of the universality of the two-parent American family in such

shows as "Father Knows Best", has now spotted this trend in family life. Several situation comedy series such as "Joe" or "The Courtship of Eddie's Father" tried to romanticize and make it "in" and fulfilled to be living in such a family. In real life it is not such fun and is far less exciting.

Professionally, we are all well aware of the major impact that parental breakup has on family members. The family is often thrown into a traumatic period, being left with a significant void previously filled by the absent parent, regardless of how strong the parent was. For the remaining parent there is necessitated a major redefining of social and cultural norms. Children are no longer as protected or considered too young for an accelerated assumption of responsibilities. In Judaism, even a young child is encouraged to share the responsibility of saying *kaddish* for the full year upon death of a parent. At home, the youngsters suddenly find new responsibilities thrust upon them, including shopping, cooking, laundry, caring for a sibling or house-cleaning. While there are many traumas in these families, too often a mistake is made in assuming problems in one-parent families to have pathologic roots as if there were an out-of-control disease. We even neatly label and oversimplify what we do not understand by the appellation, "one-parent family kid with a problem." We do not often take into

* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service. May 31, 1976

¹ S. Morton Altman, "Single Parent Families," *Viewpoints*, Nov. 1974, p. 5.