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**THE COMMUNITY
STAKE IN
JEWISH EDUCATION**

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THE COMMUNITY STAKE IN JEWISH EDUCATION

A COMMENT

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My remarks will, perhaps, have greater clarity and will hopefully make more sense if I share with you several assumptions which guided me as I read and then listened to the papers prepared by Mr. Cohen and Mr. Zibbell.

I am, first of all, committed to the proposition that it is the fundamental right of each and every group in a democratic Jewish community to conduct educational programs of its own design and purpose. In principle I would have to acknowledge the equal claim of all educational programs on whatever services and resources the community may have to offer. While I cannot reasonably object to the establishment of standards which would serve as criteria of eligibility for the use and enjoyment of communal resources, I would deny the right of any sector of the community or of the community at large to legislate educationally for any group.

CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY

That position is not a matter of theory alone. It is derived, in part, from the sense of discomfort I often feel when confronted with what strikes me as an all too casual and easy use of the term "community." The Jewish polity in this country is not the discrete and easily identified entity we sometimes take it to be nor is "the community" as clear a concept as we often claim. The Jewish community in its American setting is both an ambiguous term and an amorphous entity. We are on much surer ground when we describe Jewish life in this country as a composite of the activities of a wide variety of groups which because of disparate and sometimes conflicting needs and interests will only occasionally act together for the achievement of goals they share in common. The individual Jew will more often than not find his sense of "community" and the expression of his identification in one of these groups rather than in the wider, and necessarily vaguer setting referred to as "the community."

It follows from this that I often find myself in difficulty when Federation is used as a synonym for community. I doubt that such a usage is an accurate reflection of the reality. Indeed one may rightly ask for a

definition of Federation which encompasses the various roles it plays. There are times when Federation is equated with community; there are times when it is perceived as an umbrella organization; on other occasions Federation will play the part of a coordinating agency; and on still other occasions it is just one other organization defending its interests and projecting its needs in competition with other groups. Those of us who are outside of the Federation family and yet work with Federation agencies are often confounded by this shifting of roles and perforce approach our contacts with sensitive caution.

IDEOLOGIES

The fact that Jewish life in the United States and Canada is really a conglomerate of groups is not in and of itself a bad thing. We would do well to encourage and support the growth and development of various groupings and ideologies. Our real concern ought to be that Jewish life today is bereft of powerful ideologies. The emphasis on "trans-ideological" programs which characterizes a great deal of discussion in Jewish circles today carries with it a negative connotation -- that ideologies are to be avoided or at least overcome. I do not share that view. I rather believe that only as Jews are rooted in an ideology of Judaism will they be moved to commitment and action.

That is not to say, however, that the existence of groups, each with its special interest, is not an unmixed blessing. It does make planning difficult. The recognition of this fact would, I think, more accurately reflect the development of Jewish life in the United States than a statement which would attempt to give the impression that the agencies and institutions we know and use are the end result of rational and careful planning. One need not be a professional historian to know that what exists in Jewish life today is less the outcome of deliberate programming and more the product of crisis, accident, and not least of all, the play of particular personalities around certain issues and institutions.

"NOISE" ABOUT JEWISH EDUCATION

I do not question that Federation has a role in Jewish education. The purpose of our discussion is to clarify that role. And I would agree with Mr. Cohen that a diminution of the "noise" about Jewish education is a necessary condition for meaningful analysis. Much of the talk about Jewish education is really nonsense. Jewish educators have made extravagant claims and have promised more than they, or for that matter any educator, Jewish or non-Jewish, can really deliver. By the same token, the clientele of Jewish education has made demands that are beyond realistic expectation. They have expected the Jewish school to do and achieve what perhaps no school system in the world is capable of achieving. We are engaged in what must

surely be one of the most extraordinarily difficult of all human tasks - the molding, shaping and forming of human beings. No one really knows how to do that and Jewish educators are certainly not at the bottom of the list in their lack of knowledge or success.

I would agree that money alone is not enough and that the sudden availability of money is not going to turn the tide overnight. That truth, however, ought not seduce us into thinking that there is no need for more money or that money cannot solve any of the problems of Jewish education. A minimal increase in Federation allocations to Jewish education would be of immeasurable value in the life and practice of Jewish schools.

CONSTITUENTS OF THE COMMUNITY

Mr. Cohen has given us some guidelines which he considers useful in our attempts to determine the role of Federation in Jewish education. I do not find those guidelines and the examples which they generate to be terribly helpful. The analogy he draws from the family agency is not, I fear, to the point. He notes that there are "conflicting orientations about psychological treatment methods" but that "we don't expect...a different family agency for each notion of therapy." The inference is clear -- why should different groups in Jewish life each expect or demand a separate school, or school system to promulgate its views. The analogy is not a helpful one because there is a substantive difference between the objects of comparison. Psychological orientations are not constituents of the Jewish community -- Freudians or behaviorists or Gestaltists do not come to the community as such and say "do something for us, we have a stake in the community and the community has a stake in us." School people and their supporters do have a stake in the community and the community has a stake in their work in a way completely different from that which obtains in a treatment center. Mr. Cohen may be correct in stating that "most of the member communities of the Council of Jewish Federations would not expect to create an institutional bed for every Jewish senior citizen who needs one" -- again the inference is clear: why create a Jewish school for everyone who needs one. I would hope, however, that every community would count it a moral obligation to provide a bed for every Jewish senior citizen who wants one -- similarly the community should feel it a moral obligation to permit a Jewish school for every group which finds its needs unmet in existing educational institutions and programs.

CAMPING

I must similarly reject the reference to current practice in the area of camping. It is unfortunately true that few Federations are ready to finance more than a single camping program. Why that is so is beyond my comprehension. I can find no educational, logical, or moral justification for a posture which makes communal funds available to one camping program alone and

studiously disregards the existence and needs of a host of other programs in camping. The position is an indefensible one because all the children in all those camps will some day hopefully assume roles in Jewish life -- why are some children considered more worthy of investment than others?

PRIORITY SETTING

Mr. Cohen suggests that Federations should find it possible to concentrate on specific aspects of Jewish education and out of its experience develop a pattern of priorities. I have no objection to the principle; my participation in the process would, however, be contingent on a clarification of the roles assigned to those involved. I would not agree that the determination of priorities is a function of the Federation alone; nor would I readily assent to the proposition that the Federation possesses an expertise not easily vouchsafed other agencies. There can be no question that the process of Jewish education would be enhanced were it to grow out of a deliberative procedure which involves all those who participate in its practice. In this sense Federation can and should play a unique role -- its disinterested position permits it to serve as mediator between contending views.

JEWISH COMMUNAL CITIZENSHIP

The notion of Jewish communal citizenship proposed as a curricular objective by Mr. Zibbell is an important though not new idea. Jewish schools could do worse than develop among their students the sense of membership in the polity of the Jewish people. But much has to be done before the suggestion can be moved from the realm of proposal into the arena of practice. We need, first of all, to develop a theoretical model of the Jewish community; we need to create materials and texts; we need to train teachers; and we need to create opportunities for students to experience the sense of community which is a prerequisite for meaningful study. One cannot question the fact that in this particular area, one of several curricular tracks, Federation has a unique role to play and it should be a matter of regret to all of us that its potential has not been realized.

The idea of communal citizenship as a major curricular area has within it several important implications. In its broadest sense it would seek to develop a generation of Jews which will assume the wide variety of roles that need be played in a community of vigor and purpose. The assumption of these roles -- volunteers, contributors, leaders, policy makers, professionals -- depends in great measure on the development of deep emotional commitments. The practice of these roles depends in great measure on sophisticated intellectual skills.