

# An Orthodox View of the Social Service Partnership

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The Talmud, which serves as the basis of rabbinic literature and Judaic life, provides a snapshot of the core requirements for a communal infrastructure. It emphasizes the pivotal role that the *kehillah* (community) plays in the nurturing of its inhabitants. The following passage legislates both the religious needs of a community and the elements of the societal infrastructure that would address the legal, humanitarian, charitable and health-care-related needs of its citizenry:

תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין דף יז עמוד ב

כל עיר שאין בה עשרה דברים הללו אין תלמיד חכם רשאי לדור בתוכה: בית דין מכין ועונשין, וקופה של צדקה נגבית בשנים ומתחלקת בשלשה, ובית הכנסת, ובית המרחץ, ובית הכסא, רופא, ואומן, ולבלר, (וטבח), ומלמד תינוקות.

*Any city that does not have the following ten items established within it, a Talmid Chacham (a learned man of Torah) is not permitted to dwell there: (1) a bais din (judicial system), (2) a communal charity fund (3) that is distributed with transparency and communal oversight, (4) a synagogue, (5) a bath house (for hygiene), (6) an outhouse, (7) a doctor, (8) and other healthcare professionals, (9) a scribe or some say a butcher, (10) and a teacher of children (educational system) (Talmud Bavli, Tractate Sanhedrin, 17B, emphasis added).*

Since our first encampment in Sinai, the Jewish nation has provided for our people. Wherever we have found ourselves, the need for a well-organized community has been critical to our existence—and our survival. No doubt the talmudic passage above has played a key role in our ability to endure a long and at times bitter Diaspora.

Today, the Talmud's philosophy of community remains both relevant and in effect. Fast forward two millennia and we behold a more modern yet similar system. The American Jewish system of communal services was established as European Jews immigrated to these shores in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many of these communal lay leaders were inspired by their traditional Jewish values of social responsibility and concern for all. They brought the philosophy and requirements of the Talmud with their meager belongings. These immigrants could not rely on outside assistance from others: they were strangers in a strange land and looked within for the support to survive and flourish. As they succeeded in the New World, they built the institutions demanded by their heritage.

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One of the first accomplishments was the establishment of the community charity funds that underwrote the Jewish social service and communal agencies. An early example was the Hebrew Free Loan Society of New York, which was founded in 1892 and remains the oldest monetary “gemach” (free loan society) in the United States. Along the same principle, in 1914 when the Jews of Palestine (then under Ottoman rule) were cut off from normal sources of support by the outbreak of World War I, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee was formed.

The communal obligation for charitable giving was channeled into a common infrastructure and raised to a new level with the creation of local federations; the first one was established in Boston in 1895. Up until this time it was the synagogue where the Jew turned for assistance. But as challenges increased and elements in the community became more Americanized, a different focal point from which to pull resources for effective responses became necessary. The Jewish federation combined efforts to raise funds needed to support Jews in the Diaspora of the United States, back “home” in Europe, and for the pioneers resettling Palestine. It created a contemporary infrastructure to collect and disburse *tzedakah* in accordance with the talmudic principles stated earlier. It promoted the creation of social services agencies and other entities that were intended to sustain and enrich Jewish life that was continuously threatened by exile, ongoing prejudice, injury, and even massacre.

In addition to supporting Jewish life around the world, federations began centralizing core services to respond to local and domestic crises. A prime example was in 1934, when during the Great Depression the New York Jewish community responded to the crises in unemployment by launching Federation Employment Services (FES). The intent was to address both the local crisis in employment discrimination and to assist young immigrant Jews to identify, prepare for, and obtain employment despite that rampant discrimination.

In the 1940s FES built partnerships with other organizations to serve the community more effectively. It was named an “essential wartime organization,” assisting returning veterans and settling refugees in the New World. Uncertainty at that time reflected a loss of innocence, shattered lives, and sheer panic about the future. Seventy-five years later the same organization, now known as F·E·G·S, is still forging partnerships and remains at the forefront helping those affected by the present yet less visible “war” for survival.

In the opening decade of the 21st century, once again, unemployment is affecting those from the most educated, qualified, and affluent to those with a less comfortable lifestyle. It is often complicated by the onset of depression and anxiety. On losing a job, not only is a person’s usual source of income gone but also his or her work relationships, daily structures, and the important sense of self-purpose are affected. Such devastating realities are being addressed by F·E·G·S and UJA-Federation of New York through Partners in Caring, ParnossahWorks (פּאַרוֹסאַוּוּרְקס) as stated in the Talmud), and Connect to Care, initiatives that provide an array of employment and career development supports.

We have come full circle. We have harnessed the professionalism of the Jewish communal services world and then injected its expertise directly into the synagogue world. For example, Partners in Caring (PIC) is a contemporary venture with UJA-Federation that uses the synagogue as the gateway through which

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to reach the Jewish community. Synagogues (בית הכנסת) as stated in the Talmud) supported by mental health professionals are able to reach people otherwise put off by the stigma of receiving services provided by the mental health community. The synagogue remains the safe haven where people can go to gain strength, guidance, and direction for what is challenging them outside the synagogue.

### **F·E·G·S AND THE ORTHODOX JEWISH COMMUNITY**

In prewar Europe, communal outreach and “social work” services were firmly embedded within the collective infrastructure of the cities, towns, and villages in which the Orthodox Jewish community lived. *Chesed* (kindness)—providing care for those who had not—was not a static concept, but rather a living breathing organism that permeated the consciousness of virtually all inhabitants. In larger towns, soup kitchens were prevalent, and those who were less fortunate knew exactly where to go for a hot meal on a daily basis. In smaller towns, the inhabitants took it on themselves to care for their neighbors who were down on their luck. Everyone took personal responsibility for their fellow Jews. However, on arrival in America these same communal activists demurred from active participation in established benevolent organizations. Their need for religious insularity trumped their potential involvement in the secular Jewish communal arena.

Historians argue that American Jewish history has been characterized by an unparalleled degree of freedom, acceptance, and prosperity. These liberties have made it possible for Jews to secure their ethnic identities in concert with the demands of national citizenship, to a degree far more effortlessly than Jews in Europe or elsewhere.

Along with others, as years went by, the Orthodox community grew and became more secure. A professional infrastructure was established that created communal support groups and organizations that had the expertise to address the needs of their membership. However, as time went on and the Orthodox community grew, their needs increased as well, and requests grew exponentially for assistance, intervention therapy, and rehabilitation.

Decades later, a veil of denial and refusal was lifted to uncover a Jewish community facing issues of domestic violence, abuse, addiction, and mental illness. Although the Orthodox initially sought an insular inward-looking existence, the environment that surrounded them had great influence on them and their children. Communal leadership became bombarded by the outpouring of requests for intervention, reassurance, and guidance. Collaboration with the organized Jewish communal world became essential, although initially there was a great deal of opposition to this from within. Nevertheless, the needs eventually outnumbered the voices of opposition.

The popular Jewish folksong intones “how good and pleasant it is when brothers sit together.” A modern subtext to this ideal would be how bold and courageous it is when brothers sit together. There can be no greater praise for the religious and communal leaders who forged working collaborative agreements while respecting the religious and professional standards that such liaisons would require to be meaningful and impactful.

One example of the collaboration among leaders was the F·E·G·S partnership with the Orthodox Union to support *Positive Jewish Parenting*, a national

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informational program to provide best practices, support, and instruction to Orthodox parents to help prevent and immunize their children from “at risk” behavior or lifestyles. These parenting workshops blend traditional thought and mores with modern-day concepts. Rabbis, health professionals, and social workers share the instruction to empower today’s Orthodox parents—from the Chasidic world to the more modern Orthodox—to deal most effectively with the great challenges that are assaulting today’s family.

F·E·G·S has also joined forces with *Madraigos*, an organization working with Jewish teenagers at risk for substance abuse. Madraigos (which means “steps” in Hebrew) aims to guide today’s youth on a path of self-improvement and emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being one step at a time. The Satmar Rebbe has been quoted as saying, “What a Jew didn’t see in 18 years in Europe, he now sees in 18 minutes on the streets in America.” In response, one area of change within the Orthodox Jewish community is a more open approach both to addressing personal problems and to answering this question: “How do we protect/arm ourselves adequately?” F·E·G·S’ *Nobody’s Perfect*, a program focused on prevention and eating disorders, speaks to just this need for prevention and awareness. In another collaboration with UJA-Federation, F·E·G·S created eating disorders prevention programming targeted to the observant Jewish community.

Many teenage struggles of today often fly right under the radar of parents and teachers who previously were equipped to deal with child development issues. Today, kids seem almost better informed than their parents are about issues that affect their everyday life, and it is the rare parent who can keep up with the rapid technological advances that so conspicuously influence our youth. The number of good attentive parents who let their guard down when they or their children are online, because of a lack of knowledge about the risks of the Internet, is astounding. We spend years telling our children not to talk with strangers, but yet we “invite” into our very homes unfiltered Internet access. The latest I-Phone gadget that we excitedly give as a Bar Mitzvah gift is often found to be the very gateway to problems of addiction, gambling, and pornography that affect our children. According to the FBI, computer crimes are the fastest growing variety of crimes in the United States. That is a far cry from what people were exposed to in the shtetl.

In a new UJA-Federation initiative entitled *Mental Health GPS*, F·E·G·S has joined with the Jewish Board of Family and Children’s Services and Westchester Jewish Community Services to increase awareness of the discretion that is required to defend against the dangers of today’s challenges. This program can provide the vitally needed assistance to help parents navigate the mental health system for their children or adolescent. Families no longer have to feel alone in their often isolating journey.

Training and awareness though are not required only by parents or the lay community. Professionals themselves are confronted with more complicated cases than ever before. Issues of molestation and multilayered mental health problems hit the mental health professional at a rapid and aggressive pace, and they have an unprecedented need to be informed about a variety of modalities. To help provide that training and information, F·E·G·S has collaborated with *Nefesh*, the International Network of Orthodox Mental Health Professionals (נפש) as stated in the Talmud). *Nefesh* provides a vehicle for mental health professionals,

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rabbis, and educators to network to address the common challenge of enhancing the emotional well-being and *achdut* (unity) of the Jewish people. F·E·G·S has provided administrative expertise in facilitating conferences and professional enrichment, often bringing in internationally renowned experts to educate the international Nefesh community. This association allows for professionals who are fervently religious, but very much exposed to modernity, to arm themselves adequately with the necessary skills to approach present-day challenges with present-day modalities and equipment.

Many Orthodox Jews still go to their rabbi before seeking professional help because of the fear that nonreligious treatment options will alter or compromise their religious lifestyle. This is precisely why organizations such as Nefesh International, the Brooklyn Task Force on Children and Families at Risk, and even the Brooklyn District Attorney's office have begun to train rabbis, giving them the necessary referral information to assist their constituents. Increased utilization of such secular services indicates that the Orthodox community is in fact more comfortable with accepting this direction. It is the social services giants such as F·E·G·S that have encouraged and supported such training, all the while being respectful and sensitive to the religious and societal needs of the community.

The new dynamics in the Orthodox community now include the training of law enforcement, Administration for Children Services (ACS) workers, and Hatzalah volunteer ambulance members. ACS workers need to know about the customs of a *shivah* house so they understand that certain behavior has more to do with tradition than with resistance to authority. Hatzalah members must know the basics of what a psychotic episode looks like so they are well prepared to make the vital decision of where to hospitalize. Collaborations with the Brooklyn DA's office and the Task Force on Children and Families at Risk make the dissemination of such knowledge a working reality and have alleviated the pain associated with misinformed decisions.

F·E·G·S continues to respond to the diverse and ever changing needs of the community. Emerging needs include molestation awareness, to which F·E·G·S, in cooperation with Sacred Lives, JBFCS, the Met Council, AJCO, and Derech Hachayim (all Jewish social service agencies), has recently responded by co-sponsoring a program on summer safety attended by more than 100 directors/administrators from Orthodox summer camps. Those staff to whom we entrust our children over the summer now have the proper knowledge of what summer safety entails in 2010.

## CONCLUSION

The present-day "war" challenges are too enormous for any one entity to tackle by itself. F·E·G·S can pride itself on its keen ability to nurture and sustain collaborative partnerships that address the ever-changing needs of the Jewish and general community. These key partnerships not only galvanize professional resources but can also better leverage public funds at a time when such funds are being stretched thinner than ever. Partnerships between representative agencies in the Orthodox community and general Jewish communal services can also leverage public funds in ways that individual entities cannot.

We began this article with a quote from the Talmud: "Any city that does not have the following ten items established within it, a *Talmid Chacham* (learned

man of Torah) is not permitted to dwell there.” Clearly the items enumerated by our sages are still critical services desperately needed by the community today. But why does the Talmud focus on the *Talmid Chacham*—the learned man? Should not these truths hold true for all men and women? Let me suggest that, for there truly to be collaboration and partnerships in service to all segments of the community, the community must be led by wise, learned, and dedicated men and women who can overcome stereotypes, engender trust, and forge relationships based on integrity and respect.

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