

(continued from preceding page)

Book Reviews—Walter A. Lurie, Ph.D.	335
<i>All God's Children: The Cult Experience—Salvation or Slavery</i> , by Carroll Stoner and Jo Anne Parke; rev. by Rabbi A. James Rudin	
<i>From the Pages of My Communal Diary</i> , by Rabbi Isaac N. Trainin; rev. by Sanford N. Sherman	
<i>New Career Options for Women: A Counselor's Sourcebook; A Selected Annotated Bibliography; A Woman's Guide</i> (3 vols.) by Helen S. Farmer et al; rev. by Claire O. Gertler	
Briefly Noted	338
Agency Publications—reviewed by Mitchell Jaffe	339
Index Volume LIV 1977-78	342

Jewish Community Relations—Boundaries and Priorities

Albert D. Chernin

Executive Vice-Chairman, National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, New York

In the formulation of policies and the projection of program plans for Jewish community relations, the question continually recurs: Does this or that issue fall within the scope of the Jewish community relations field?

Some issues that are obviously of Jewish community relations concern today were not always obviously so. Others that appear peripheral may in fact be linked closely to Jewish self-interest. The present extensive and complex Jewish community relations program is the product of a long process, beginning with considerations of self-interest and expanding as our understanding of the relationships between Jewish security and creative survival and the state of the society in general expanded.

What Makes Priorities

Our first priority is Israel, of course, reflecting the complete identity of views of the American Jewish leadership with the concerns of the rank and file of the American Jewish community.

But this was not so thirty years ago. It was only around 1955, when the Soviet Union through its surrogates was shipping massive arms supplies to Egypt, that we began to play a more active role in regard to the Middle-East. But we identified our concern narrowly, as the "community relations implications of Middle-East developments." We confronted Arab propaganda in the United States in terms of its anti-Semitic content. We approached the Arab boycott in terms of its discrimination against American Jews.

However by 1967 we had dropped these rationalizations and were committed to the preservation of the security and survival of a Jewish state. We recognized that as the freest, most affluent, best-educated, most articulate and secure Jewish community in Jewish history, a Jewish community fully integrated

into the most powerful democratic nation on earth, we have a responsibility to Israel just as we have a responsibility for the status and security of Jews anywhere—whether in Skokie, Illinois, or North Philadelphia or Kiev or Jerusalem or Damascus.

The high priority we give the plight of Soviet Jews also is of relatively recent origin. Before 1963, it did not receive such attention, despite the bitter suffering of Soviet Jews under Stalin, particularly during the "black years," 1948-53, and under Krushchev when Jews were executed as scapegoats for economic crimes. There was concern, yes. Important material on Soviet Jewry was published by our agencies and there were discreet efforts through diplomatic channels. But it was not until 1963 that a significant priority was given Soviet Jewry.

What prompted this priority was not a massive spontaneous manifestation of concern by American Jews, as in the case of Israel. Awareness of the issue had to be created. The rank and file of the American Jewish community had to be awakened. Soviet Jews had to be emboldened to act on their own behalf. American and world public opinion had to be aroused.

The catalytic factor was the perception that exposure of the repression of Soviet Jews—not only silent diplomacy—would ultimately bring about some modification of Soviet policy and practice. This implied a strategy that required mass involvement. The strategy proved effective. And it was the relative success of the strategy that impelled us to give the issue the high priority it commands today.

Identifying "Jewish" Issues

Nothing is of more immediate or more unambiguous Jewish concern than anti-Semitism, overt or covert, at home or abroad. Concern with anti-Semitism is the point of departure of the field of Jewish community

relations today as it was in the early years of the twentieth century. But there is another dimension of the problem. The goal of the Jewish community relations field is "to foster conditions conducive to the creative survival of the American Jewish community." In what kind of society would the conditions exist that would best contribute toward the security and creative survival of a distinctive Jewish community?

Let us fantasize the ideal: a society that guarantees freedom of religion; which, in turn, required freedom of conscience, freedom of thought, freedom of worship, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of association.

A Jewish community which is less than three percent of the population would be best served by a society in which a fundamental role of the state is to protect each individual in the free exercise of these rights, while barring the all-powerful state from using religion for its purposes or, conversely, any one or all religions from using the state for their purposes. Such a society, keeping religion and the state forever separate, would place a priority on voluntarism and pluralism and regard the worth of each individual as its supreme value.

These abstract ideals would be concretized in the form of fundamental law, in, let us say, a Bill of Rights on which the whole structure of basic rights would rest. In our own self-interest, we would be vigilant against any assaults on these principles, either directly or by erosion, even guarding against our own short-run interests, when they undermine our long-run interests.

As a field we recognized—significantly during and after the Holocaust—that such democratic processes and protections best serve the interests of Jewish survival; that the more the reality of American society corresponds with the democratic ethos, the more comfortable we will be in fulfilling our Jewish aspirations.

Fortunately, this American ethos runs parallel to our Jewish ethos; they are not in conflict with each other.

So, we seek to exclude religious practices from the public schools, not because they are hostile acts aimed at the Jewish community but because they erode the principle of separation of church and state which we regard as vital to our survival as a unique community.

So, we are concerned with civil liberties—the right of petition, to assemble, to march, as we have done on behalf of Israel or Soviet Jewry. And we have been concerned with its denial, as in Selma, Alabama, until the federal government stepped in to protect those marchers whose positions were abhorrent to the great majority of the residents of Alabama.

Broadening the Scope

Our concern with the separation of the church and state and civil liberties reflects our concern with the survival of the Jewish community as a collective whole as distinguished from our parallel responsibility of protecting the rights of the individual Jew as a Jew, which led us to challenge discrimination against Jews, women as well as men, in all of its aspects—in housing, employment or education and in other facets of community living.

To do so effectively we had to translate our particular grievances into universal principles, equal opportunity principles requiring each individual to be judged on his or her individual worth, not on the basis of color, creed, religion, sex or any other irrelevancies, in determining where a person may live, where he may work, where he may study. We recognized that such principles must be enforced by the power of the state, and thus must be translated into legislation and court decisions applicable to all segments of American society, not selectively enforced on behalf of any one group. In coalition with others we have stood as guardians of this principle.

In the last fifteen years, we have made significant progress in undergirding this principle with legal sanctions, but as Edward Lindeman reminded us, each new plateau of success produces new problems, more complex and

more difficult to remedy.

In the middle sixties, Congress enacted comprehensive civil rights legislation, but it soon became evident that fair employment required full employment; fair housing, full housing; fair education, quality education for all. Otherwise, the principle of equal opportunity would be undermined by a struggle between the have-nots and the recent have-nots for scarce housing, education and jobs. By an inevitable progression, our struggles against anti-Jewish discrimination led us to support of equal opportunity and from there to support of equality in fact.

At this stage we were confronted by the challenge of the burdens that a complex society heaped upon individuals whose Jewishness was only incidental to their problems. In the best Jewish tradition, we were "taking care of our own." However, we readily recognized that the needs of the Jewish poor, for example, required resources substantially beyond the resources of the Jewish community. Their problems, like those suffered by many others in society, could only be ameliorated by massive action by federal, state and local government. Thus, such issues as health, welfare, and even crime on the streets came to be regarded by the Jewish community as Jewish problems, and thus a matter of concern for the Jewish community relations field.

In the final analysis, the boundaries of the Jewish community relations field are set by the dimensions of the Jewish community's stake in the nature of the American society. We have a responsibility, indeed an obligation, to join in shaping the American system and the American society as we would want it to be.

What makes an issue Jewish may be not the nature of the problem, but the nature of the prescription that we as the Jewish community advocate. Our answers to public policy questions are rooted in two thousand years of experience in diaspora. As Heine put it, since the Exodus, freedom has been spoken with a Hebrew accent.

Ordering Priorities

Our resources, of course, place limits on the nature and scope of our role. We have to determine not only whether an issue belongs on our agenda, but how we rank it in importance, what priority we assign it. In some cases we may only join with other like-minded groups in signing a statement in regard to some broad concern such as the role of the National Labor Relations Board, whereas we conduct a sustained multi-faceted response in dealing with the plight of Soviet Jews.

Are there rules of thumb for ordering our priorities?

When an entire Jewish community is endangered, when Jewish lives are at stake, when the opportunities for sustaining Jewish identity and Jewish continuity are threatened, when the Jewish state is besieged, those issues will obviously be our first priority and require the total mobilization of our resources.

Our priorities also will be determined for us by the depth of concern that the Jewish community as a whole feels about a particular issue. So, not by polls but by our shared concerns can we sense the concern of Jews throughout this country about administration policies in regard to Israel. The legacy of the past, such as the nightmare of the Holocaust, has a part in triggering concern which may not always correspond to reality today.

Whether the fears of the Jewish community are justified by our assessment, which is based on our experience and expertise, Jewish community relations agencies have a responsibility to respond to those concerns. We may part company from the rank and file in the remedies that we apply in specific situations; for it is our job to weigh the long-run consequences of prescriptions urged upon us by the Jewish community to deal with an immediate situation.

When our remedies may not coincide with those advocated by the rank and file of the Jewish community, and indeed by some of its

leaders, we have to provide channels through which the pain and anxiety of the Jewish community can be constructively expressed.

Circumstances also dictate whether an issue, by its nature marginal, may become a central concern in a different time, place and situation. What catapults some issues to a pre-eminent position on our agenda may have little to do with the issue itself but much with the manner in which the problem asserts itself on the American scene, such as the impact of severe polarization upon the democratic process in which we have such a crucial stake.

Recall the domestic dangers unleashed by the Vietnam war or, in an earlier generation, the economic strife of the 1920s and 1930s or the periodic witch hunts in American history. In some circumstances, we were even concerned with campaigns against fluoridation. Inflation normally would not be regarded as a Jewish community relations concern but in some situations it might be one of profound concern. Recall the consequences of the destruction of the German middle class in the 1920s as a result of the runaway inflation. If that were to happen here it would be a matter of profound concern to us.

So, in setting priorities we are called upon to anticipate those issues and urge solutions before we pay a heavy toll in social destruction. An example might be the potential danger to the American society inherent in the enormous unemployment rate that exists among black teenagers in this country side by side with affluence enjoyed by more than 75 percent of the American people.

Our priorities also will be determined by the depth of concern about certain issues that grip all Americans, especially when there appears to emerge, however fleetingly, a national consensus about the remedies to be applied; such as, for example, the consensus which the country seemed to have reached following the March on Washington and the Kennedy assassination in regard to civil rights legislation. In that case, we as a Jewish community relations field were called upon to play a more

active role in concert with our fellow Americans.

On the other hand, issues that are central to Jewish interests may receive a low priority because we cannot provide an effective remedy or there is very little chance the remedy may be achieved. However, a changed situation may suddenly catapult such issues into a top priority for the Jewish community. In the 1950s, after codification of racism in the United States Immigration Code of 1952, we gave only the attention required to keep alive the call for repeal of the national origins quota system in our immigration code. But, when a candidate and then a president emerged who seemed ready to lead the fight against the national origins quota system, the issue immediately was given a top priority.

Not only did a change in strategy increase the emphasis we gave Soviet Jewry after 1963, but the emergence of a particular tactic—the Jackson-Vanik Amendment—resulted in our investing still greater resources on behalf of Soviet Jewry in the early 1970s. The Arab boycott had been on our agenda as a matter of concern for more than twenty years. But it was the sudden and rapid massive infusion into the world economy of petrodollars and our collective judgment that the Arab boycott could be challenged through comprehensive federal legislation that led to making this issue a top priority.

Thus, again, as in so many cases, it was not the issue but our evaluation of trends and conditions that determined our priorities.

Another consideration that should guide us in determining our priorities: depth of concern about a particular issue by our allies and friends who have joined us in matters of profound concern to the Jewish community. No group, however powerful, can singlehandedly achieve its programmatic goals in isolation from other groups on the American scene. While issues require prime movers—such as our leadership on behalf of Israel or Soviet Jewry—none of us, neither we nor our friends, can go it alone in achieving solutions to the

critical items on our agenda. We must support each other, usually in a modest supportive role, as long as the positions don't collide with our own fundamental positions.

Thus, we acted in support of amending the National Labor Relations Board in full recognition that we were responding to the needs of one of our closest and most constant allies, the American labor movement. We provide such support with the full knowledge that in the final analysis there is no *quid pro quo* but the relationship increases the likelihood of support and diminishes the possibility of their opposing us.

To sum up: I have suggested (1) that there are no clearly defined limits on the agenda of the Jewish community relations field, that what happens to America is of profound concern to us as an American Jewish community; (2) that the issue then is not the question of what is on our agenda, but the priorities that we give those items on the agenda.

Considerations that should influence our hierarchy of priorities include (a) those issues that spell out clearly defined Jewish needs; (b) issues that trigger Jewish concerns; (c) how certain issues impact upon the American democratic process; (d) circumstances; (e) the efficacy of our remedies, and last (f) the concerns of our allies.

Achievements

Over the years, the Jewish community relations field has responded effectively to the needs of the Jewish community and of American society. Goals that seemed unattainable have been achieved:

- the civil rights legislation for which we labored for nearly twenty years;
- the immigration legislation for which we labored for nearly forty years;

- the anti-boycott legislation for which we labored twenty years;
- the very creation and sustenance of Israel for which we all have labored for generation upon generation;
- the emigration of Soviet Jewry and, more incredibly, the renaissance of Soviet Jewry for which we labored nearly forty years.

These only hint at the progress to which the Jewish community relations field can justly and proudly claim to have contributed uniquely. However, our success has only increased our burden, rather than reduced our agenda.

The Historic Guideposts

What guides us as a community are those Jewish values that have become part of the muscle fiber of every Jew; those values derived from multiple sources of Jewish experience; those values perpetuated in a variety of ritualistic practices of the Jewish community.

It is those values to which we have instinctively given our highest priority. Those values impel us to remember we were slaves in Egypt. Those values constantly remind us of the felt recollection of redemption. Those values command us to remember our martyrs from Masada and before to the Holocaust and beyond to the fields of battle in the Negev, Golan and Sinai. Those values command us to resist tyranny. Those values oblige us to accept our special mission.

In the very process of translating these values into the action required of the boundless agenda of humankind, we foster the distinctive survival that is our responsibility to assure. So, we are not only concerned with what is best for the Jews but we are constantly impelled to act upon what is the best in our Jewish heritage.