

The Jewish Helping Team: A Structure for Choice and Identification

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The "Jewish Helping Team" . . . provides a confluence of Jewish religious and communal processes and experiences which carry out a poly-centered Judaism. It is made up of members each of whom has a different ability, attitude and function and who support each other as they undertake to be helpful.

This article flows primarily from a JFS point-of-view. The "Jewish Helping Team" referred to in the title involves a team made up of social workers, lawyers, and rabbis. Other organizations and volunteers become part of the team in individual situations. It is the writer's belief that we all are teaming up with others in the Jewish community everyday but, perhaps, need to focus our attention more consciously on what this teaming up has to do with Jewish identification and choice and how they can be encouraged and deepened.

The search for what is distinctive and yet so elusive in our Jewishness has been increasingly meaningful, yet frustrating. Our need to pinpoint precisely a uniquely Jewish dimension is complicated by the many levels involved in the search. The author notes that we are dealing with cognitive, emotional and spiritual factors and their interrelationship within an individual, family and community. We are also considering the Jewishness of our agencies from the standpoint of (a) ambience, (b) program and (c) the helping process itself.¹ In addition, the dialogue necessitates our defining Judaism for ourselves. This means we need to recognize that we are working with a poly-centered entity:² one made up of Halachic, communal, and "homeland" dimensions. To add to the amalgam of variables, our field is continuing to discover that a wide variety of people in differing roles,

¹ Dr. Bernard Reisman, *The Emerging Jewish Family—A Program for the Jewish Family Agency*, Institute for Jewish Life, 1974.

² Leonard Fein, a speech given in San Antonio, 1976.

as individuals and in relationship with each other, can play an important part in bringing about human services of excellent quality within a matrix of Jewish identification.

For the purpose of this article, the author wishes to emphasize a poly-centered nature of Judaism and to show how a Jewish Helping Team fits, conceptually, into the expression of these "centers."

The "Centers"

1) *Halachic* — this dimension includes a reaffirmation of the Sinai experience (that we were all there) and a feeling that we are part of a faith that began and continues to live with the Jewish people. It relates to *Kavannah*, the spirit of our prayer reaching Heaven while the words remain behind, like ashes in a fire after the smoke has risen upward.³ It presupposes a personal involvement, joy, struggle as each of us searches for a life of deep meaning. An understanding of Bible, Talmud and history is important for Jewish communal workers as it puts each of us in a better position to assist others in dealing with the fact that G-d is not an insurance policy, guaranteeing us sanctity in a world which includes self-doubt, hurt, brutality and death. We can then point out that each of us has the responsibility for learning to understand right from wrong as we make choices, for valuing ourselves, for learning how to experience closeness with others and for learning to live with what we cannot control.

³ Martin Buber, *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman*, New York: Avon Books, 1956.

2) *Community* — this religious-communal system, based upon Halachic values, offers opportunities for a person to get in touch with his own unique identification as a Jew. This includes a system of relationship, shared ethnic, cultural and language connections. Through community, an individual may garner resources which provide a caring support and learning system that can enhance the meaning and need-fulfillment of his life. Our congregations, communal agencies and Jewish professionals help with these needs and, especially, when life's realities, or our attitudes to them, threaten to overwhelm us. In community we can extract the values with which we need to live.

3) *Homeland and Diaspora* — In our communities we are continually dealing with people who are touched by major geographic changes in their lives. We of the galut are, as Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan has described us, like a "disbanded army." Our uncertainty about ourselves, and, in particular, our Jewishness leaves us with a residue of anxiety. Many of us, separated from family and neighborhood of origin, work at making a place for ourselves wherever we are living. Jews from the USSR, South Africa, South American and other countries come in touch with us as they visit America or decide to resettle because of threats in their own land. *Ha'aretz* (The Land) is a central focus for us. Its presence tugs at us in the diaspora, representing a source of pride, mystery, danger and, perhaps, even escape. The lives of numerous Jewish Family Service clients are touched by Israel or by a fantasy of what it could mean to them.

The Helping Team as a Mediatlional System and a Potential Jewish Atmosphere

Because we are speaking about meta-physical, communal, emotional and cognitive factors, all in random interplay, and since the human will is not coercible and each person develops at his own pace, the best we can do is to consciously establish an atmosphere⁴ in which Jewish curiosity and choice may take

⁴ Dr. Bernard Reisman, *op. cit.*

place as we do our work. We should not create such a Jewish atmosphere *for* others or to meet some ideal but rather as an expression of what is truly meaningful to our staff, board and clients at the present time.

The Jewish Helping Team, which we utilize daily, is one of the many ways in which Jewish experience and learning are born. It provides a confluence of Jewish religious and communal processes and experiences which carry out a poly-centered Judaism. It is made up of members each of whom has a different ability, attitude and function and who support each other as they undertake to be helpful. The religious-communal team we are considering here is made up of social workers, rabbis, and attorneys and, at times, other professionals or staff from varying agencies and volunteers. Out of the work this group agrees to do together (professional and volunteer), Jewish dimensions come alive in ways which offer opportunities for a deepening Judaism to the helpers as well as to the recipients. Much happens spontaneously although there may be room for an established, funded team effort with regular strategy sessions.

The following examples will point out how the social work, Halachic and medical-legal processes collide with each other and find reconciliation in a commonality of purposes. The rabbi's caring conviction in Halacha and ability in carrying it out, the attorney's caring about Jews in trouble and ability to deal with the systems where governmental power is located and the social worker's caring and ability to decipher and work with personal and communal emotion and conflict as well as to marshal community resources, all combine to deal with issues which people face. Although each member may have an emphasis on certain qualities, no single quality is located exclusively in a single member. For this team to help, the courage to believe and carry out *tzeddakah* is necessary. Yet we need to know that helping is not "saving" and we have to have social work principles as underlying realities collide with the obligation to help and it is important for the team to think through helping in the best way possible.

Example 1

The R's come from South Africa to San Antonio to see if they can work out living here. They are frightened about what could happen as racial and political problems grow in intensity in South Africa. They have heard we were helpful to a friend who visited from South Africa six months ago. The R's are in business and need to invest here. They ask if we can help. I write to them stating that we do not line up investments but that they can meet with our Business Counseling Committee and, perhaps, get some ideas.

When they arrive they are offered an interview both to get to know more about them and to prepare for the business counseling session scheduled for that evening. Without plan I call the Jewish Community Center and a staff member warmly agrees to meet with them and arranges for them to have dinner with another family who recently emigrated from South Africa. A Welcome Wagon driver of the JCC also agrees to have them for dinner and to provide certain transportation.

On the first evening they meet with six businessmen who help them think through some key issues about locating a business in San Antonio. All volunteer knowledge and business contacts to be helpful. By this time they are deeply moved by the reception as they were alone and petrified about this exploration of a new world. They follow through with the team attorney to examine some technical difficulties in buying a business and then needing to return to their country. At the end of the week they attend the Solomon Schechter Hebrew Day School orientation meeting for parents. They are warmly welcomed and some couples are trying to help them decide to come to live here. They meet new families from the Soviet Union and have more dinner invitations to round off their stay.

Halachic mandates to care for the stranger and communal efforts to carry this out are a part of this example. The attorney gives the technical support while the social worker gives emotional and community resource support. Other agencies participate; volunteers are utilized in a variety of ways. One could pass the above off as "friendliness" but the

caring and skill as well as the coordination in bringing them together offer something more. The clients validated the meaning of their Jewishness as part of a world community of Jews who reached out to them in one of their loneliest moments. All those who participated in helping carried out expectations which come from a religious value system and were part of a team which represented a communal response.

Example 2

A young man, age 21, an Israeli soldier, and formerly a resident of the Soviet Union, gets into trouble. The girl he loves, also a former Russian, lives in Cleveland. They want to marry and, for reasons of their own, decide that this has to be in the U.S. They want to marry but he cannot get the proper visas to enter the United States. Impulsively, and perhaps manipulatively, he flies to Mexico, thinking he can merrily walk across the border. He is arrested outside of Laredo and jailed in San Antonio.

He calls his fiancée in Cleveland and she immediately takes a bus to San Antonio. She goes to the immigration officer and JFS is called. The social worker interviews her and makes arrangements for the Rabbi to be brought into the situation. The young man, David, has been on a hunger strike for two days as he only eats kosher food. The rabbi meets with him and makes arrangements with the warden for special foods to be brought in. The attorney is then involved and he begins to work out a plan for securing bail, after all have compared their evaluations and find this a situation which requires team intervention. JFS makes arrangements for the girl to stay overnight with a New American family.

The following day the young man is released and in order to help him have a chance of avoiding deportation, plans are made for the couple to be married as they request. On Friday, at 5:00 PM, a number of people gather at the shul. The chupa has been set up and the press is in full attendance for such a romantic story. This has been arranged by the attorney who feels that the publicity will be helpful at the deportation hearings which will take place in Cleveland where the couple will head.

The rabbi and cantor conduct a beautiful

service. The social worker is the best man who gives the toy ring to the groom. The bride wears the wedding dress of the rabbi's wife and her own leather sandals. The groom is in white shirt, levis and sneakers. The *minyan* is composed of Israeli paratroopers in training at a local air base, two new families of the Soviet Union, staff members of JCC and JFS, the attorney, who becomes "father of the groom" and the regular *minyan* members. All dance around the *chupa* and share a mutual sense of purpose at being substitute *mishpocha* at such a critical event in the lives of two people. JFS provides the motel expenses for the weekend and then the couple leaves for Cleveland.

This religious-communal effort also has an element which relates to Homeland. One can more plainly see the coalescence of the centers of Judaism in the above experience. The writer, and the other team members, are not people who believe in fairy tales, and therefore, understood the element of irresponsibility and manipulation which played a part in what had been set up. However, the team unfailingly risks generosity even in the face of such elements unless we see the individual as a destructive force against himself and others. For the couple, there was an incredible experience of being reached out to as part of a family and, for the Jewish community (including the team) there was a sense of deepened Judaism and of community in particular.

Example 3

This last example pertains to a 58-year-old woman suffering severe pain in her spine. She lives in Austin (78 miles away) but insists that her daughter drive her to San Antonio since she wants to speak with a Jewish counselor. She has lived in Israel for a number of years but has returned because of her physical condition.

The primary issue on her mind is getting rid of the continual pain. She could not discuss her feelings with a non-Jew as she has great bitterness toward Israeli doctors whom she blames for unhelpful surgery and pessimism and she cannot say this outside of the Jewish

community, she feels. She also has much emotional pain from the marriage of her daughter to a non-Jew of lower station in life.

In addition to counseling, the social worker is able to connect her up with a fine Jewish neurologist who agrees to help her. She is hospitalized, surgery is performed and there appears to be a good chance for her to be completely well after she recuperates. She is delighted with the doctor and the hope she now has. A JFS volunteer is assigned to work with her everyday as her adult children cannot make the 3-hour trip so often. The rabbi agrees to meet with her during the long hospital stay and the social worker has an additional session with her to help her talk about her experience and feelings. Client expresses much gratitude at the caring she discovers.

In this example, the social worker, a physician, volunteer and rabbi work together to offer a Jewish response which fits each dimension of Judaism described earlier.

While we cannot discuss the I-Thou relationship between each of the participants and G-d, we can say that Halachic responsibilities of great importance were adhered to. Communal response, in the local as well as world sense, entered into the work of the team. Homeland played a part as well and, more and more, *Ha'aretz* (The Land) touches some part of the lives of people whom we assist. Whether it be a New American arrested for shoplifting, a paranoid schizophrenic threatening Zion (us) with death unless we produce \$40,000.00 per year, circumcision of New American children, or Jewish travellers who are lonely and who need company or food on the Sabbath, the Jewish helping team can bring a wide variety of abilities, supports, and Jewish possibilities.

The Jewish atmosphere for choice and identification is assisted by such a team venture. While it is not always easy to define the Jewish aspects of what we do, this writer believes it is important to practice seeing a poly-centered Judaism in even the simplest helping tasks. We have to be willing to apply a Jewish language (religious values, culture, history, etc.) to matters which have seemed to

us to be totally clinical, therapeutic and secular.⁵

The team represents Jewish communal continuity, caring, values, knowhow and resourcefulness. Team members gain the support of each other as they risk helping, making errors, and learning in each endeavor. Within these team experiences, some aspect of a poly-centered Judaism can be "sponged up" by the client (and helper) for future use. However, we get no points for interesting someone in his own Judaism since we know that his answer can only be, "I am who I am." Each of us (helper and client) works on a unique, personal identity which can be accompanied by a sense of belonging when we *need* to belong. The team presents a context—and experience—which *may* be a catalyst for

⁵ Rabbi Howard I. Bogot, "Family Change—Nursery School Response," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. LIII (Summer 1977), No. 4.

client curiosity or genuine interest in the many Jewish aspects of him or herself now or later.

As significant as the coalescence of feelings engendered by the team is the coalescence of concepts in "the eye of the Jewish beholder." When we speak of "the worth of the one" (the individual) are we willing to change that social work information into a Jewish notion, *Kadosh? Kadosh*, meaning unique and holy, to this author is a deeper more enduring idea—a Jewish value if the reader will allow. From there are we willing to leap to a devotional feeling, a faith in a transcendental and eternal G-d from whom all values spring, if one believes that? Are we willing to go that far in the binding of secular, clinical and religious issues? This author believes we are moving into that very eerie zone where such questions will have to be faced and where the quantity and quality of our individual and collective wholeness will be at stake.