

# The Jewish Component in Jewish Communal Service

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**Foreword:** *One of the issues that continues to perplex practitioners working in Jewish Communal Service is the nature of the Jewish component in their work. What makes the problem particularly difficult is its constantly changing nature, since as American society and the American Jewish community change so does the field of Jewish communal service and its Jewish component.*

*The article by Charles Zibbell that follows was read as an opening address in a symposium for a number of young Jewish communal service workers in Baltimore who had demonstrated their uncertainty in the matter of the Jewish component during classes in the Isadore I. Sollog Program in Continuing Jewish Education for Jewish Communal Workers. The symposium took place at the Baltimore Hebrew College, February 19, 1978. There were three main problems facing the young workers. In the first place, they were unsure of the Jewish standards and positions of the agencies for which they worked. Secondly, they were unsure of the Jewishness of their clients or, indeed, if anything "Jewish" motivated the client to turn to the Jewish agency. Finally, many of the workers were as yet unsure of their own Jewish commitments. The end result was triangular confusion as the workers sought to operate in a context in which they were unsure of their agency's Jewish position, of their client's Jewish position, and of their own Jewish position.*

*As a result of discussions during the Sollog Program, a number of Jewish agency leaders in the Baltimore area, including Dr. Leivy Smolar, President of the Baltimore Hebrew College (which has overall academic responsibility for the Sollog Program), Mr. Bernard Rosen, Director of Baltimore's Jewish Community Center and Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Sollog Program, and the late Milton Goldman of Baltimore's Jewish Family and Children's Service met with me to arrange a conference to deal with the problem of the Jewish component of Jewish communal service. While we realized we could not solve the issue in one afternoon and evening session, it was our hope that the papers presented at the conference representing the different functions in Jewish communal service, together with the comments by the discussants and the roundtable discussions which took place in the evening would help clarify the many facets of the problem and deepen the understanding of our Jewish communal service workers.*

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Let me begin with a disclaimer. What I am about to present is *not* a definitive statement on the Jewish component in Jewish communal service. As a matter of fact one of the key arguments I will make is that it is not *possible* to make a definitive statement on the topic. I will, however, attempt to set forth some of the elements that must be taken into consideration in a discussion of this issue.

## Not a New Issue

The issue as presented for discussion today is obviously not new. The fact of the matter is that this has been a problem of perennial concern for generations of Jewish communal workers. One has but to thumb through the pages of this journal to find continuing

discussions of this thorny issue. This continuing attention has thrown considerable light on the subject, but the persistence of this topic on the agenda of Jewish communal workers reflects the fact that we are dealing with a deeply rooted problem that is not susceptible of any easy solution. Arnold Gurin in his bout with the topic<sup>1</sup> in 1966 recognized the intractability of this issue and spoke confidently of the fact that Jewish communal workers would periodically continue to address themselves to what he termed a "value dilemma."

The problem has been discussed in a variety

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold Gurin, "Sectarianism: A Persistent Value Dilemma," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. XLII, No. 1 (1966) p. 38.

of contexts. One major rubric has been the question of the *rationale* for Jewish communal services. Another approach has been the exploration of the Jewish purposes of each of the Jewish communal services in which we are engaged. Another effort has been to deal with it from the broad perspective of "sectarianism" and the role it plays in American democratic society. Perhaps the earliest shorthand reference was the phrase, "Jewish content" which has been with us for decades. The use of this phrase seemed to imply that there was a clearly defined substance that one could insert into communal programs, much as jelly is added to the doughnut.

Some observers have formulated the issue as *Jews vs. Judaism*, almost as if they were polar opposites. In this context an examination was made of the relative attention or resources devoted to services provided to Jewish individuals as compared with those services which are provided to the group as a whole.

Today, our formulation is an analysis of the Jewish component in Jewish communal service.

#### Why the Concern at This Time?

Why has this concern surfaced once more at this particular time? Why is it felt that there was enough urgency in the issue that it should become the subject matter of this gathering? Here are several items for consideration:

(1) A major problem is the state of Jewish communal financial resources in North America. It is no secret that since the high point of communal fund-raising in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur war, in our central communal campaigns we have reached a leveling off in three consecutive years, (and probably in an additional fourth year). This plateau would have been bad enough if we had a relatively stable economic situation, but in the face of substantial annual rates of inflation it has produced financial pressures that are all but overwhelming.

(2) When we look at the need side of the equation, the situation is worse. There is a growing recognition that the services which we

are currently providing fall far short of meeting needs that by common consent we would identify as acute. It is not merely that we need more caseworkers or group workers or Jewish educators. There is a quantum leap in needs based on an expanded communal agenda. There are new areas of communal concern that now seek to become an integral part of the Jewish communal agenda. The issue of the Jewish component becomes material, since one of the resolutions of the gap between needs and resources is the thrust to make rational judgments on programs by learning the comparative extent to which they partake of the Jewish component. In shifting resources from the old programs to the newly expanding programs, a major criterion is the notion of the Jewish component and the attempt is being made to identify this as specifically as possible so that it can serve as a guideline to those who are responsible for making decisions on the use of Jewish communal resources.

(3) Closely allied to this concept of expanding needs and shift in resources is the development of the concept of priorities. From the federal government down this notion has elicited broad approval and there are attempts to devise schemes, numerical and otherwise, to develop priority judgments as between one need and another. This is a rocky road and we do not have the time to explore it. A major problem is that one man's priority is another man's frivolity and we come face to face with the need to reconcile conflicting values. In a community like ours that rests on balance and pluralism, the concept of priorities has within it the danger of obscuring the need for hard, step-by-step decision-making that maintains the integrity of the communal consensus, and does not produce a polarized and fragmented community.

(4) An additional feature further complicates the question of distribution of resources. We have basically been discussing the domestic scene. Recently an issue has surfaced which for a decade has been lying dormant, even though at one time in our Jewish communal history it

reflected a major polarization among Jewish leadership. I refer to the question of overseas needs versus domestic needs. There are many gray heads in this audience who do not need to be reminded of how this question produced conflict in our communities, sometimes polarizing the situation so that it seemed we had two kinds of Jews—the overseas Jews and the domestic Jews, and never the twain shall meet. I consider it a mark of the maturation of the North American Jewish community that we were able to overcome this division and we were able to recognize the commonality of the needs, the mutual reinforcement of the programs and above all the need for Jewish unity. In the face of diminished resources, the issue has begun to surface again and I simply put it on the table.

(5) The substantially increased use of government funds in Jewish communal programs is an additional factor stimulating interest in the Jewish component. From one perspective the increased use of government funds has acted as a safety valve, an additional pocket of resources to which Jewish communal services could turn legitimately to meet special needs that were appropriately financed out of government funds. From another perspective, there was a growing danger to which all of us are sensitive that the requirements in the use of government funds can put us on the road to a desectarianization of Jewish communal services. It introduces a new force-field which propels our communal programs towards those priorities which the government has established in its own wisdom, and which may not relate at all to the needs that we perceive as Jewish communal organizations. The greatly increased use of government funds is reflected in these two simple figures: last year Federations allocated for all local purposes about \$125 million. *Excluding* the huge government funds for hospitals, those same agencies received *more* than \$125 million from the government. From this perspective we have a major responsibility to examine these funds carefully and to make sure that the sectarian goals of our communal

programs are not sacrificed on the altar of government funding.

(6) Finally, the impact goes even beyond government funds. One has to recognize that the government's influence on the use of even private voluntary resources is growing. The United Way presents a case in point. In its effort to raise funds among government employees it has had to accept restrictions by the government related to "affirmative action." In some areas the affirmative action guidelines that United Ways have imposed on our Jewish constituent agencies have raised the specter once again of desectarianization, despite the fact that it is clear philosophically that the United Way has no right to make this demand as the price of allocations out of the United Way Funds. Federations collectively have taken the position that United Way funds are *not* government funds and that the United Way itself is an intersectarian organization and that sectarian agencies have a right to maintain the sectarian character of their services. Yet, the pervasive climate embodied in the phrase "affirmative action" in the American republic today represents a concern that should be under discussion when we examine the Jewish component in Jewish communal service.

#### Past Formulations

But now let us get to the heart of the issue. How can it best be probed and examined? The past should offer some guidance. One way in which this issue has been identified is the nature of the population for which the service is being provided. Simply put, if the service is provided to Jews it is a Jewish service. Or is it? Is it still Jewish if most of those served are Jews? Or some of them? What percentage? Is it different for different kinds of service? What about a service rendered only to Jews but so remote from Jewish communal concerns that by common consensus it falls outside communal responsibilities?

Thus the simple idea of relying on the nature of the group served is not so simple after all.

Let's look at the obverse. Is it true that if

services are not delivered to Jews it is not a Jewish service? Does this square with the Jewish tradition of Tzedakah? What does our heritage say about our concern for the "stranger in our midst"?

Another context in which this problem has been discussed is an examination of the Jewish communal worker who delivers the service—what was his Jewish knowledge? What was his Jewish commitment? How did he serve as a role model? Maurice Hexter once phrased it: "It is not Jewish content, it is Jewish *intent!*" How germane is this element to our discussion? It may be a major item that we should examine in an effort to determine whether a Jewish component is present in the Jewish communal service.

The professional discipline which the communal worker used was also part of the exploration. The Jewish teacher in a Hebrew School was using education as his discipline, but Jewish education, ipso facto demonstrated that there was a Jewish component. It became much less clear when the discipline that the worker used was social work. Here the question could be raised because the discipline itself had no special Jewish content, and in fact perceives ideological commitments by the worker, as dysfunctional in performing the service. There was sometimes a myopic tendency to focus on the discipline being used rather than in examining the social objective of the agency's program.

There emerged a general consensus that it was the *program of the agency itself, conceived in broad terms*, that provided the testing ground for the Jewish component—its goals, its communal role, its relationship to creative Jewish survival.

### The Jewish Past

Before I offer a hypothesis for consideration, we should see if any light is shed on this topic by earlier periods of Jewish history. There is little doubt that it would be very valuable for someone to do an in-depth examination of this issue from an historical perspective, and it should be on our agenda.

However, even a cursory look through the pages of Salo Baron's masterwork on the Jewish community reveals the fact that in different times and different places the Jews took on a fantastic variety of responsibilities as a community. These grew out of the historic situations in which they found themselves. As an example, the special medieval regulations which Jewish communities developed against ostentatious clothing were recognized as being essential to protect the safety of the Jews from the hostility of their neighbors in the host country. Would this square with the Jewish component today?

Noteworthy is the fact that in many periods of Jewish history, the Jewish community was itself a corporate entity charged with the responsibility to levy and collect taxes on behalf of the reigning prince. Is this a "Jewish component" activity? It is clear from the history of those periods that carrying on that activity was absolutely essential to Jewish survival. What this tells us is that we must also look at historical context.

But let us not overlook a different process that seems to have taken place in periods of Jewish history that may offer some insight into our own experience here on the North American continent. Observers have noted the tendency of Jews to reach out into the general society within which they live and to adapt functions to their own needs and by means of the peculiar alchemy of our tradition to Judaize those functions so they become programs that re-enforce Jewish life. In a sense, this is the reverse of the assimilatory process, and illustrates the survival capacities of the Jewish group. A dramatic modern example is the borrowing of the American principles of federalism and the development of the communal structures of North American Jewry around the Federation concept.

### Sociology and Ideology: A Working Hypothesis

In seeking a basis for examining this issue, I am resting more heavily on the sociological rather than the ideological. This is not simply a

matter of personal preference. It is based on an assessment of what has proved workable in Jewish communal organization. I believe that the effectiveness of organized Jewish life in America rests on the fact that it has been less concerned with ideology and more concerned with the social reality and the variety of needs emerging from that reality. This is not to denigrate the value of ideology, but simply to point out that with the emergence of the Jews into modernity when a broad gamut of choices was available to them, the reconstitution of a Jewish communal structure was not possible on the basis of ideology. Quite the reverse. The various ideological formulations, important as they were in influencing the goals and values of Jewish life, could not serve as a basis for communal organization, since the multiplicity of viewpoints made ideology too divisive as a basis for organizing the Jewish community. Let me emphasize here that today's communal system of Federation and its agencies has never claimed to be the totality of Jewish life. Much that is essential and vital goes on outside the core system and takes place in the "private" domain as David Sidorsky terms it. But there is a dynamic involved: as "private" agenda items become part of the community consensus they enter the "public" agenda. A good example is the relatively recent shift in attitudes towards Federation funding of day schools. This concept of private agenda vs. public agenda is vital in making judgments on the issue we are discussing. Frequently, what we mean when we search for the Jewish component is not so much an examination of program goals and content, but an examination of whether that program now falls within the communal or public agenda.

Therefore, it is entirely appropriate that we should begin the formulation of an hypothesis on the Jewish component in Jewish communal service, by exploring the sociological context.

What I am suggesting is the recognition that since Emancipation, the Jews in the western world have been exposed to an open society and have been working out their sense of their own individual and group destiny and their own identity in this framework. At one pole is

integration into the general society and at the polar opposite is segregation from the total society. At different points along this continuum Jews have made decisions about their group life. These polar opposites are in tension with each other, having attraction and repulsion for members of the Jewish group. The options selected were products of both internal and external factors. When we examine the adjustment process to this continent, we see that at various periods of history and even in different activities within the same period of history, Jews elected to engage in programs that helped them integrate more fully into the society around them; yet at the same time they selected other activities which were inward looking, which were distinctively Jewish, and which related to the elements that separated them from society, rather than integrated them within society.

This formulation identifies the Jewish component as a dynamic not a static concept. It is a function of the values and aspirations within the group acted out against the backdrop of what is taking place in Society around it. The implication is, therefore, that it is impossible in this context to define the Jewish component for all time. Rather, the Jewish component must be viewed as a response to the Jewish condition at a particular time and place. Further, it may well be that the Jewish component in one field of activity will occupy a radically different position from the Jewish component in another field of activity. Thus, it is a dynamic that not only needs to change with Jewish history, but may vary from one field of endeavor to another.

This formulation to be of practical value should offer guideposts and concepts that enable us to examine the Jewish component. There is a danger that the idea is so broad and open to interpretation that it fails to provide criteria or standards, so that we can distinguish between that which is Jewish and that which is not Jewish in a communal program. Let us, therefore, test out this formulation as it applies to some issues on the communal agenda and their impact on the fields of Jewish communal service.

### Testing the Hypothesis

A good case in point may be the area of resettlement of immigrants. No one will deny the critical nature of this Jewish service and its vital role in maintaining the integrity and continuity of the Jewish group. It is in the great tradition of *Pidyon Shivuyim*, a redemption of the captives. Yet note the contrast in comparing the communal role in resettling Eastern European immigrants in the early years of this century with the task of resettling Soviet Jews today. With the earlier group the thrust was "Americanization," to enable them to enter the mainstream of American life. With Soviet Jews a key concern is "Judaization," based on the need to make up for their lack of contacts with Jewish life over a long period. Is it not true that both efforts can be identified with the Jewish component?

Let us take a look at an entire field of service, community relations. Originally, it dealt with defense against attack, and there was general agreement that self-defense is a critical element in the survival of the group and that defense against anti-Semitism was clearly a Jewish activity. There soon grew the recognition that waiting until one is attacked is not the appropriate way for Jews to defend themselves and that the most effective method of self-defense is to actively assist in creating a social environment in which Jews can feel comfortable and secure and that Jews should play some role in helping to maintain that kind of environment. If it is true that a liberal democratic society is the safest place for Jews to live in, should Jews as a group invest communal resources in order to assure the maintenance of that kind of a society? Is this a Jewish activity? Should this be a part of the communal agenda?

But let me take that one step further. One of the major targets of our community relations programs, an activity that has taken more and more of our time and our resources, is to insure that there will be strong public support of Israel's position. All of us know that the major way to have impact on the government is to have impact on public opinion. We must cultivate attitudes in public opinion in all the

corners of the United States and Canada, among all classes and kinds of people, in order to insure that Israel will have a friendly climate of opinion. We know, too, that people cannot be approached en masse; they have to be approached in terms of specific groups. We need avenues to reach Protestants, Catholics, Blacks, trade unions, the media, the campus, and so on. But we have also learned in the pluralistic and multi-group society that is America that if we seek allies for our point of view, we must show concern about the problems that each of these groups faces in meeting their own objectives. The system rests on trade-offs—one group for another. If we want the trade union movement to be ardent and strong in support of Israel, at some point along the road as a Jewish group, we will have to support the trade union movement in some of their goals and objectives. One can argue, then, that the support of certain trade union positions through our community relations activity is therefore a Jewish component activity.

In summation, what does this formulation offer as a basis for our discussions? Is it firm enough to test against our own ideas, our own experiences and our professional goals?

It seems to me that the formulation does offer a framework. And I suggest the following additional guidelines in applying it:

#### Guidelines

1) Departures from programs which are prima facie devoted to Jewish needs and the Jewish future, on the basis that they are appropriate for the current situation, should be based on the knowledge of the Jewish past, and commitment to the Jewish future. In other words, in the earlier days those who focused on the commitment and knowledge of the professional and the lay leadership were essentially taking a sound position. Both professional and lay leadership must be grounded in all of the elements that go into the Jewish value system, in the Jewish past, and in the contemporary Jewish scene, with a keen understanding of how Jewish communities meet the problems of Jews. Only then can they develop mutations and variations. Ignorance

of the Jewish past and the Jewish value system cannot serve as a sound basis for Jewish decision-making.

2) Jewish communal services must be based on needs. This is the only solid basis for the construction of Jewish communal service programs. This is part and parcel of the pragmatic non-ideological approach. The fundamental test for examining the basis of a communal program is to assess the need that it attempts to meet. When this need is placed in the proper setting, when its quantity and quality and direction are made clear, it will give us an opportunity to make a judgment as to whether it is an appropriate part of the Jewish component in our Jewish communal package.

3) This is an amplification of point number two, and yet should stand by itself. After the need has been defined, an appropriate judgment should be made, as to the essentiality of conducting the program to meet that need under Jewish communal auspices. The need may be valid, solid, demonstrable, and substantial, and yet it may be possible to conduct that activity in concert with other groups so that it is a non-sectarian program or to take steps to influence the government to carry on the activities under public auspices. Included in the consideration must be an evaluation of the prospect that this activity would in fact be taken up by the government, or non-sectarian groups if the Jews abandon it. And one would have the right to raise the practical question of the net loss to the Jewish community in abandoning a particular program if there were no practical possibility that it would be replaced by public or non-sectarian programs.

4) Israel's welfare is a major guideline. In the past thirty years and more the Jewish

people of the world have been obsessed with the need to help establish Israel on a safe and sure footing. We all devoutly hope we are well on the way to doing that, and that we are on the threshold of steps towards peace in the Middle East. Are we now ready to consider whether automatically any activity which is conducted in the Jewish community on behalf of Israel is ipso facto an approved item on the Jewish communal agenda? We can now examine the kinds of activities which deserve our support within Israel as part of the "public agenda." I believe we will begin to find that many activities which are conducted on behalf of Israel more properly belong on the "private agenda" to be carried on by certain segments of the Jewish group but not by the Jewish communal apparatus.

5) There must be a recognition of the need to work with people where we find them. Our long-range goals must be their involvement in creative relationships with the Jewish people. But in order to be effective we must meet them on their own ground—institutionally and programmatically. Our goal is change but we are professionally and communally committed to a method which means we must begin where they are.

6) Finally, we must not neglect the leadership role of the professional worker in Jewish communal service. His is not simply the task of discovering social reality, pursuing need and identifying the community concerns. He must have a vision of the Jewish future and in that framework he has both the right and responsibility to help create consensus. That will be the highest test of his leadership skill.

His goal is to help bring about the kind of Jewish society that the Prophet foretold when he wrote, "Your old men shall dream dreams; your young men shall see visions."