

Reform and Welfare Policy: The Contribution of Henrietta Szold

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There is a striking common purpose among modern reformers. They advocated legislation for child labor reform, improved housing and other social measures to ameliorate the ills of society. It was Mary Richmond (1861-1928) for example who, beyond her contribution to social work education, obtained legislation on behalf of battered wives. Lilian Wald (1867-1940) was a pioneer in public health nursing and Grace Abbott (1878-1939) alerted the people of Chicago to its child labor problems. Among the social reformers of the period one must also include Henrietta Szold. Born in America in 1860, reared in Baltimore, educated as teacher and journalist, she was an early innovator of welfare thought and reform in pre-state Israel. At age 60 she migrated to Palestine from America and there became one of the leading spokesmen for the poor and disadvantaged. Szold's determination to improve the plight of the needy set her apart from other communal leaders who immersed their energies in striving for national independence.

The focus of this inquiry is to explore Szold's humanitarian outlook and its influence upon the Yishuv,¹ her view of the legislative role in society and her concept of a helping process that was related to the community and family. Though often

falling short of effecting the social change she envisioned, Szold stands as an influential crusader for welfare reform in the pre-state period.

Szold's Humanitarian Stance

Baltimore saw Szold's first exposure to human suffering in the mass. In the late 19th century many of the Jews fleeing from Russia made their way to the United States. A Russian ghetto was established in Baltimore, where hunger and toil were commonplace. Szold's welfare work commenced with these Russian immigrants. Many Jews could not find employment because of their limited knowledge of English. This handicap also barred them from attaining a goal they valued most, American citizenship. In order to help them overcome this barrier, Szold founded what was perhaps the first night school for Jewish immigrants in America. Not only was she its founder, but also its teacher, fund-raiser and principal. She vividly described her identification with these newcomers:

I feel very much more drawn to these Russian Jews . . . There is something ideal about them . . . At all events I have no greater wish than to be able to give my whole strength, time and ability to them.²

Her strong identification with persons in distress knew no bounds. Having settled in

¹ *Yishuv*: The term used for the society that developed along nationalist lines beginning with the first immigration (*aliya*) to Palestine in 1880.

² Marvin Lowenthal, *Henrietta Szold*. (New York: Viking Press 1942) p. 45.

the Holy Land she began to study the social problems about her. Delinquency was one of these. She described delinquents as victims, "suffering human beings." So long as I can keep my eyes open, I must work for their amelioration."³

Her zeal for change must be seen in the historical context of a country whose citizens valued productivity so highly. From 1904, the leaders of the Yishuv exhorted every able person to cultivate the soil, help conquer the barren desert and harness all efforts to achieve national independence. Her determination to help the underprivileged was apparently not in keeping with the overall purpose of the Jewish community to achieve self reliance.⁴

Szold was determined to arouse a collective consciousness among the leadership of the Jewish community and not to abandon those in distress. The platform for pleading such a cause was granted to her in the Summer of 1935, at the 19th World Zionist Congress at Lucerne, Switzerland, where Szold vigorously advocated support for the social services. This was the first time the subject of human suffering in the Yishuv and support for its solution were raised. The issues surrounding social welfare and guidelines for action had not reached the agenda of the Zionist congress in the past. Indeed, raising the issue was somewhat of a breakthrough. Szold's enthusiasm is spelled out in a letter to her sisters in America. She writes:

I was informed that social service has been put on the Congress program. The Zionists have never recognized social services in Palestine . . . They fought shy of charity as the

distinctive Jewish occupation of the Diaspora and arrived to put social justice in its place in Palestine, with the result that we neither had the one or the other . . . At this nineteenth Congress its claim was recognized . . . I had to plead before the budget commission for a budget, which I did not get. But social service is on the Zionist map.⁵

Szold was perhaps too optimistic in her correspondence. One finds limited evidence to suggest that concrete results were achieved as a consequence of her appearance at the Zionist Congress. No special committees to examine the plight of the indigent were formed, no resolutions passed and the financial burdens continued to be a major concern until the very creation of the State. Szold's appearance at the Congress was made possible because of her special role as Director of the Department of Social Service and leader of Hadassah. But it did little to bring basic social welfare policy change and reform.

On the other hand it was because of Szold's leadership qualities that the Department of Social Services was created and its expansion made possible. By 1935 only four years after the Department's establishment there were nine major welfare centers serving approximately 32,000 people or about 11 percent of the population.⁶ By 1935 the number of local welfare bureaus had tripled with offices reaching as far North as Zfat.⁷

The services provided by the local welfare bureaus comprised cash payments and benefits in kind, such as hot school lunches, groceries and clothes for the needy. Though these services included means tests

³ Henrietta Szold, Letter to her sisters in America from Jerusalem, September 14, 1920, The Hadassah Archives, New York.

⁴ For a more detailed view of this position note Ruben Schindler, "The Pioneering Ideology and the Roots of Social Welfare in the Pre-State Period of Israel," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Summer 1976, pp. 389-392.

⁵ Henrietta Szold, Letter to her sisters in America from Brindisi, Italy, October 10, 1935. The Hadassah Archives New York.

⁶ *Yediot Al Havodah Hasozialit Bereta Israel*, Social Work in the Land of Israel - Vol. 1 (June 1935) Newsletter, Hebrew, pp. 10-17.

⁷ *Hasheret Hasozial Bknesset Israel*, Social Services in the Community of Israel (Jerusalem: Vaad Leumi, February 1946) pp. 76-79 Hebrew.

and eligibility requirements, they did provide a vital life-line for the indigent. There were simply no other resources or services open to them.

Legislation and Social Services

Szold, an astute observer of social welfare realized that effective social services must be coupled with legislation. In this sense she reflected the foresight of her American colleagues who placed legislation first on their agenda.⁸ The value of legislative action is succinctly noted by Szold.

As in all manner of social service so on behalf of the child and the youth the crowning activity should be that culminating in social legislation, which on the one hand should tend to nullify the need for social service; on the other hand should fortify the social service machinery and the values attained through communal effort.⁹

She viewed legislation as a duality. Supplementing the social services was one goal, to achieve universality was its second. She placed particular emphasis on child legislation. There was no law for example which protected children from cruel exploitation by their employers and prohibited children below the age of 14 from working. Of juvenile offenders she would write, "They are not offenders at all. They are sick, defective undernourished, mentally and physically starved children."¹⁰ The difficult plight of both Jewish and Arab children prompted the mandatory government to establish juvenile courts for

children between the ages of 9 and 19. The ordinance also abolished death sentences for juveniles who had not completed their 18th year, and substituted corrective detention for imprisonment. On the other hand powers were given to the courts for the referral of dependent children and their institutionalization without proper diagnostic evaluation.¹¹ Szold's overall response to legislative activities by the mandatory government is put succinctly. "There is no purpose even to mention legislation, there is hardly any in regard to children."¹²

What she was unable, however, to accomplish through legislation was partially achieved through child care services she initiated. Under her leadership, the budget for children's services expended from 50 thousand p.p. in 1935 to 750 thousand a decade later. By 1943, over 50 child welfare institutions were accountable to the Department of Social Services.¹³ Her work was not limited to social services within the Department. She, like Lillian Wald conceived of preventive programs within the school system. She initiated school lunch programs for children from kindergarten through primary school. These programs were available to children whose parents were unable to provide meals that met a minimal standard, children of recent immigrants and children whose parents were serving in the armed forces. It is worth noting that the service was not limited to children in need. Of more than 20,000 children receiving the meal service, about twenty percent were from middle-class families. Such an integrative goal was viewed as important. Emphasis was placed on peer relationship, and the importance of people of all ethnic and social backgrounds socializing. This was one of the reasons for the program's

⁸ For example Dorothea Dix (1802-1887), legislative efforts on behalf of the mentally ill; Homer Folkes (1867-1963), efforts on behalf of prevention and control of tuberculosis and Florence Kelly (1859-1933), champion of government regulation of the hours and wages of women and children.

⁹ *Yediot, op. cit.*, Vol. 2, 1935. The complete Journal is devoted to Child Welfare.

¹⁰ Henrietta Szold, Letter to her sisters in America from Jerusalem, July 1932, Hadassah Archives, New York.

¹¹ Carl Frankenstein, *Child Care in Israel*. (Jerusalem: Henrietta Szold Foundation 1950) pp. 258-259. ¹² *Yediot, Al Haavodah Hasozialit Beretz Israel*. Vol. 2, (September 1935) p. 55 Hebrew.

¹³ Henrietta Szold, *op. cit.* p. 92.

continuity and growth after the creation of the State.

Though legislation fell short of its mark, there was one worthwhile legislative innovation. Based on information accumulated by Szold and her colleagues it was found that only one-third of the children completed elementary education. It was also discovered that in some oriental communities children were completely illiterate.¹⁴ Szold was of some influence in the mandatory government's passing an educational ordinance requiring registration and licensing of public and private schools. The hope was that standard setting would follow. But the more fundamental solution of compulsory education was not enacted until the establishment of the State.

The Helping Process

Like many reformers of her period, Szold attempted to conceptualize an effective framework for helping those in need. She placed high value on local community responsibility. The community, she suggested, knew its needs best and would in turn find resources for the amelioration of its ills. Therefore the insistence by Szold and others that taxes for social services be solicited from members of their respective communities.

It should be noted that community responsibility was essentially an outgrowth of the administrative structure laid down by the British Government. Regulation and provisions for health, education and the social services were delegated to the local community. This promoted community participation and direct interest in the social needs of its members. It was rather a "bottom up approach" of harnessing citizen participation and acting in their own behalf. However, Szold took the idea of community participation further by placing

it as the responsibility of local welfare bureaus. The latter acted on behalf of citizens who would not be recipients of community care. The local bureaus would be called upon

Not only to devise and dispense constructive relief, but actually to be pension master to the old, the blind, the maimed, the paralyzed, the chronically sick; the invalid that cannot be trained even to the lightest form of productive work and especially to widows and children.¹⁵

The idea proposed by Szold was centralization of services within the community. The rationale is succinct and to the point. "The experience of the Department in this respect demonstrated, if demonstration was required, that the centralization of local service activities is an outstanding claim upon us from the point of view of the regulation of our communal life."¹⁶ In addition to the community's taking on a central role in the helping process, Szold clarified how this helping role should be executed. She emphasized two principles, prevention and family intervention. Of the latter she notes:

Just as one should not wait for the ill to become acute or the poverty stricken child to become delinquent . . . so the care and first point of concentration is on the preventive.¹⁷

A basic principle which was established suggests the development of regular, ongoing services not necessarily limited to dealing with crisis. The service should also "reach out" to the client, group and community. Prevention was translated into concrete services as in the initiation of school lunch programs, health services and diagnostic and mental health clinics. These programs were integrated into the educational system and the Department of Social

¹⁴ Henrietta Szold, *The Cry of the Children in Palestine*. (Jerusalem 1937) pp. 11-12.

¹⁵ *Department of Social Service of the Vaad Leumi*, Jerusalem: February 1932, Mimeographed. pp. 1-12.

¹⁶ Henrietta Szold, letter to Alice L. Seilsberg in America from Jerusalem, September 10, 1931. Hadassah Archives, New York.

¹⁷ *Yediot, op. cit.*, May 1936, p. 224.

Services under the auspices of the Vaad Leumi.

Prevention was viewed as the *sine qua non* in the planning of social services. Further, primary emphasis was placed on the family as the central axis for assistance and help. It is spelled out by Szold:

The existing social service agencies cover a wide and varied field of endeavor. There is provision in part at least, for child care, for the aged, the sick . . . Each agency goes its own way and practically all of them deal with the individual and his need. The family as a unit is considered by none. Yet it is a fact of social service science confirmed by the experiences of the casual observer, that in a multitude of cases of misfortune the ills of the individual are rooted in condition bound up with the family to which he belongs.¹⁸

Family casework was conceived as coordinating the various services toward the goal of helping the family deal with its problems. As envisioned by Szold, financial assistance, child care, and health care, would target in on the family when necessary. As Szold states:

if organized and interorganized properly these three divisions of Social Service can cover the whole range of mental and physical suffering.¹⁹

The philosophy advocated by Szold was primarily a service approach with the organization and access to services taking on major importance. This position is weighted significantly in her writings, and expressed with frequency. The insight that problems must be dealt with through a broad range of systems rather than with the single individual per se is a rather remarkable innovation for her period. No doubt she was familiar with Freud and was attuned to his theories, but did not get caught up with the extreme swing of American social workers toward adopting the psychological as sacred. In this sense,

¹⁸ Henrietta Szold, Address to Asefot Hanifcharim, February 1932, p. 8 - (Address to the delegate Assembly of the Jewish Community in Palestine), mimeographed.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 9.

social work development in the Yishuv period might have taken on quite a different focus and direction from that on the American scene. But this was not the case. American social workers, as Lubov points out in his seminal work on professionalism, elevated Freudian doctrine to the sacrosanct. The consequences were a shift in the casework orientation from social environment to mental process. "They identified themselves with the psychiatric clinic team rather than the social meliorist."²⁰

The view expressed by Szold suggests that societal change is a prerequisite for personality change and the former can be brought about by modifying institutions and systems. At the fourth annual conference on social services, she stated that "the question of treatment of the needy alone without intervention in all social problems is outdated."²¹

This philosophy was very much in keeping with the reform spirit. It was at odds with the later interest of professional social workers in their emphasis on intrapsychic conflicts. It was the position of reform that social work deal with social rather than individual problems.

The family as the axis of intervention and focus on the total family as the choice of treatment however did not materialize. One cannot point to the Freudian influence as a cause, though in time social work in Israel would be significantly influenced by psychoanalytic theory. There were other factors. There was the inability to coordinate services, with vested interests diffusing organizational goals. The particular client group needing to be served was an additional obstacle to family treatment. Immigrants from the world over sought cash benefits or benefits in kind and the notion of being "treated" was quite alien to their makeup. Finally one must emphasize that

²⁰ Roy Lubove, *The Professional Altruist*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1965), p. 86.

²¹ *Yediot*, May 1936, *op. cit.* p. 226.

though Szold gave impetus to voluntary activities and professional development, the lines of demarcation overlapped, crossed and often conflicted. For example, when professionalism began to develop in the period of the 30's, the Yishuv faced increasing immigration and social problems. There was need for more services which local bureaus were unable to supply. Voluntary organizations stepped in to close the gap. In light of the work which was performed by volunteer groups, the professional role and function often became diffuse. Szold who strongly advocated professionalism was equally committed to voluntary intervention. She states:

The situation we have to deal with is so intensely and cruelly human that I have come to the conclusion that ordinary common sense with even a few grains of general experience will go a long way.²²

A service approach to the family such as that advocated by Szold required professional knowledge and skill. Persons engaged in voluntary work did not possess the necessary requirements for sound intervention. It was they, however, who supervised a host of social services. The professional role was thus diminished.

Nevertheless, Szold's zeal for helping and her quest for social justice prompted her delineating criteria for social welfare. In mere contemporary terms Wilensky and Lebeaux have spoken about "social auspice—the existence of socially sanctioned purposes and methods and formal accountability."²³ Szold was likewise calling for criteria which would serve the indigent more effectively. She suggested that offering assistance selectively with a good heart and open hand was not sufficient. It

can easily discriminate against the poor who refuse to request assistance. What appears as a virtue to some may be regressive for others. She notes that "the people who spurn the use of the word charity and talk much of justice have not yet come to realize that the organization of charity is the only approach we have found to justice."²⁴ She is critical of incomplete "public accounting of monies received and spent, why there is no approved audit, why the property of the institution, though acquired with public funds, is registered in the name of a private individual."²⁵

It was through Szold's initiative that a Central Information Bureau was established. One of its tasks was to monitor the 445 philanthropic organizations which operated in the Yishuv. The bureau, in Szold's terms, would "test its legitimacy."²⁶ In a short time letters were forwarded from abroad inquiring about the aims, objectives and legitimacy of philanthropic institutions. Writing in 1933, a brief period after the creation of the bureau, Szold stated that "it would be too extensive" to enumerate the varied applications that have reached the Department for help, information and service."²⁷ The bureau's success was in producing up-to-date information about each organization's activities. A greater share of accountability began to develop.

Pooling information from the many agencies for client use was another objective of the Central Information Bureau. She describes this in some detail.

Such a daily report and record of social work performed on the whole field controlled by *Kehillah*—community, not only binds all

²² Henrietta, Szold, Letter to her sisters in America from Jerusalem, July 31, 1931. The Hadassah Archives, New York.

²³ Harold I. Wilensky and Charles N. Lebeaux, *Industrial Society and Social Welfare*. New York: The Free Press, 1965. pp. 140-141.

²⁴ Henrietta Szold, Letter to her sisters in America from Jerusalem, September 10, 1931. The Hadassah Archives, New York.

²⁵ *The Jewish Community of Palestine Vaad Leumi* (Jerusalem, Department of Social Services 1933), p. 5. Mimeographed.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 2.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 5.

the agencies to it, but also each for every other. This method of coordinating grants is the only effective means of avoiding useless duplication and revealing cruel omissions. It is the map showing at any given moment the disposition of the forces contending against suffering and misfortune.²⁸

In essence, the links of agencies to a centralized body strengthened accountability and enabled future utilization of resources. The Central Information Service, which was initiated by Szold, is today part of Israel's social welfare structure.

Summary

We have attempted to examine Szold's contribution in the sphere of welfare reform. During the period of the 1920s and 1930s Szold was an advocate for the poor, making Zionist leaders aware of their

plight. She herself was the first director of the Department of Social Welfare and was instrumental in expanding its services. She advocated legislation with particular reference to child care. Legislation was integrally related to the advancement of human welfare. The helping process was linked to community responsibility and family treatment was viewed as the core and focus of intervention. At the same time she placed equal value upon the idea of prevention. The concept of social sponsorship and accountability was not only a point for theoretical consideration but was put into practice. Though some of her ideas did not come to fruition, she is regarded as one of the leading welfare pioneers and innovators in the Yishuv.

An Omission (Fall, 1981 issue)

An editorial lapse resulted in the failure to note that Doris Hirsch, co-author with Ethel Taft of the article "Impact: Soviet Jewish Resettlement," was not identified as the Assistant Director of the Jewish Vocational Service of Los Angeles, and that the article—written early in 1980, when Soviet immigration was several times what it is today—was presented in that year to the Annual Meeting of the CJCS in Denver.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 14.