

A Search for Principles in Jewish Community Relations for the Embattled World of Today*

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THERE is a tendency to feel that as goes New York City, so goes the nation. From the viewpoint of Jewish community relations, there is evidence these days that this may not be the case.

If New York did not exist, perhaps it would have to be invented if only to retain the warm mystique of life as it was lived by Jews in the good old days. In terms of Negro-Jewish relations today, however, the absence of New York might be a very good thing.

While turmoil and strife has been raging in New York for the past few years, as Negroes and Jews appear to have locked themselves into a never-ending struggle, a small voice drowned by the cacophony might be heard asking what has happened to the "art" or "discipline" of Jewish agencies in New York?

In a useful article of 1946 "Checkmate for Rabble-Rousers" and a book *Overcoming Anti-Semitism*, Dr. S. Andhil Fineberg, dean in the field of Jewish community relations, originated what was first called the "silent treatment" later to be known as the "Quarantine Treatment of Rabble-Rousers." The Quarantine Treatment was thus defined by its author:

Quarantine Treatment is a method designed to prevent the rabble-rouser from becoming a serious public menace by depriving him of the publicity he needs to increase his audience. It employs a dual technique: legal recourse, where warranted, and persuasion offering concrete information to persons or agencies (such

as newspapers, hotels, et cetera) likely unwittingly to abet the rabble-rouser.¹

Is it not time for someone to dust off the Quarantine Treatment and apply it to current situations? The Metropolitan Museum caper might have been an appropriate re-testing ground. Viewed from the outside, the museum and its Harlem Exhibit produced tragicomic aspects as that temple of culture became at once a center for controversy within the art world and focal point for division between Negroes and Jews. Observers around the country were able to chronicle the following community relations items of interest:

1. An 18-year-old Negro girl achieved instant recognition and emerged as a leading hate monger through her essay in the Museum catalogue which was widely reprinted, in part at least, throughout the country.
2. After an all-night telephone "dialogue," she was persuaded to author an "explanation"; mimeographed and slipped loosely into the catalogue, the "explanation," according to the *New York Times*, was in some ways worse than the original and drew the attention of the reader to the essay.
3. The Museum director and board chairman were pilloried for their insensitivities and the director forced to apologize in public.
4. The soft-cover catalogue and hard-cover book describing the exhibit,

* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service, New York, June 1, 1969.

¹S. Andhil Fineberg, *Overcoming Anti-Semitism*, New York: Harper & Bros., 1943.

prepared by a Jewish Museum curator, became the target for destruction after thousands were in print.

5. Well after the exhibit opened, after thousands were sold, the soft-cover catalogue was withdrawn, leaving the hard-cover edition available elsewhere and the smell of censorship hanging in the air.

It is worth speculating on how the museum incident might have been dealt with through application of the Quarantine Treatment.

One would expect, surely, that through long experience, Jewish community relations agencies have learned how to deal with and counter The Big Lie. At a minimum, one technique is *not* to spread it. As the result of widespread attacks against station WBAI in New York, however, community relations agency staff and members alike throughout the country found themselves digesting an anti-Semitic poem with their morning coffee and hearing the poem read via radio while driving to work, millions of non-Jews having the same privilege. Harold Taylor, Chairman of the Board of WBAI, not employed by a Jewish community relations agency, wrote the *New York Times* quoting from another letter:

As Eric Salzman pointed out in his recent letter to *The Times*, if we are guilty of allowing anti-Semitic statements to be made over our station, *The New York Times* and all other media are equally guilty in their printing of the poem and giving publicity to other statements of the same character.

Is Black Anti-Semitism Exaggerated?

The Anti-Defamation League in 1969 proclaimed that "raw, undisguised" anti-Semitism has reached a "crisis" (my quotes) level in New York City. This, to the outlander, calls for a *New Yorker* magazine plea for "less vivid writing,

please." To American Jewry, I believe, the word crisis is associated with other memories: the holocaust, Hitler, concentration camps, the McCarthy era perhaps, the Bund, Klan, and so forth. Are we to believe that passing events of the day are akin to the pervasive old-fashioned "WASPish" and ethnic hatreds of the past? Is American Jewry really in the dire straits pictured from New York? Are 25 million American Negroes under such degree of influence from a sinister few as to pose serious dangers to the well-being of American Jews? On the contrary, it would appear that never before have the sins of so few been visited on so many.

As recently as 1964, Jewish community relations agencies were urged to heed the findings of Gary Marx whose book *Protest and Prejudice*² was sponsored by the Anti-Defamation League. Summarized in a letter to the *Amsterdam News* of New York, reprinted in the *New York Times*, the study suggested:

- (1) That Negroes, on the whole, were less anti-Semitic than Whites.
- (2) That the anti-Jewish attitudes among Blacks were largely a manifestation of anti-White attitudes. And that Jews were not being singled out by Blacks as scapegoats.
- (3) That the majority of Negroes failed to distinguish Jews from other white ethnic groups. But when distinctions were made, Negroes had more, not less, favorable attitudes toward Jews than they did toward other white ethnic groups.

The author of the letter, Robert B. Hill of Columbia University also made reference to an unpublished study completed for the American Jewish Committee in 1968 by Carolyn Atkinson, also of Columbia, which largely supported the Marx inquiry:

In general then, there is no evidence from our study to suggest that either Black nationalism

² Gary Marx, *Protest and Prejudice*, New York: Harper & Row, 1967.

or Black power has appreciably influenced Negroes' attitudes toward Jews. Nor is there any evidence to suggest that attitudes have changed substantially since the 1964 study.

Granted that the statistical data on which these studies were based may not be current, is it possible, or likely, that the attitudes of millions of American Negroes have so completely reversed direction in a few years?

In September, 1968, the ninety national and local member agencies in the NCRAC joined in a Reassessment Conference on Anti-Semitism Today.³ Among the conclusions reached by the Conference was: "There is no hard evidence of any significant general increase or intensification of anti-Semitism in the United States in recent years or months. Notwithstanding some acute manifestations among some Negroes and intellectuals within the New Left, overt anti-Semitism continues at low ebb, as it has been for a number of years."

A four-year inquiry into anti-Semitism sponsored by the Anti-Defamation League,⁴ recently made public, "confirmed findings of other studies which showed that anti-Semitism was far less prevalent among American Negroes than among Whites."

Jewish life is replete with questions. Who is a Jew? and, Who speaks for the Jews? are still questions in search of answers. Who speaks for Jewish community relations is a question that must be answered if the American Jewish community is to be armed with information it deserves, based on experience and examination. We are evidently

unable to apply doctrines of "fair weight" or "equal time" in setting forth positions. Dr. Abraham Duker of Yeshiva University, in spite of countervailing evidence, was able to predict guerilla warfare and pogroms in the United States at a meeting of the Synagogue Council of America this winter. Dr. Percy Tannenbaum, communications specialist at the University of Pennsylvania, also speaking at Yeshiva University, was constrained to comment on a "fall-out of anti-Semitism as a result of activities of Jewish youth in campus revolutions."

On what basis do the Dr. Dukers and Dr. Tannenbaums speak to us today? In spite of our expert use of mass media and informational techniques, agencies in the field of Jewish community relations have not been able to penetrate the Jewish community or to impart their messages even to their own constituencies. If the very group immediately before us fails to get the message as it can best be articulated, then how can its attention be directed to the positive inter-group programming so earnestly asked of it?

Twenty-five years of leadership and participation in the civil rights movement and the struggle against inequality and injustice have somehow failed to equip the American Jewish community with a rooted understanding of America's Number One Problem, Race Relations. Nor is there consensus as to just what the problem is and what we as Jews should be doing about it. Albert Vorspan, Director of the Commission on Social Action of the Reform movement was recently quoted as saying that "inflammatory' reactions by Jewish spokesman to anti-Semitic statements among Negroes are stirring the Jewish community 'to the very brink of hysteria.'" Leonard Fein, according to *Time Magazine*, is inclined to believe "that some

³ *Combating Anti-Semitism Today*, A Reassessment Conference Report, National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, September, 1968.

⁴ *Patterns of American Prejudice*, Vol. d, 1969, University of California Five Year Study of Anti-Semitism in the United States.

Jews have responded to anti-Semitism in a slightly paranoid manner." Jerome Hochbaum, community consultant to the National Community Relations Advisory Council observes that "Jews are prone to hold all Negroes responsible for the 'anti-Semitism and demagoguery of a small minority of Negro extremists'." If there is a principle to be applied here it is that internal education within the Jewish community is deserving of a higher priority emphasis than it has been receiving.

What Is Relevant Today to Community Relations Concerns?

Among the "in" words these days is the word "relevance." Are we not at a point in Jewish community relations where a test of relevancy can be applied to what we say and what we project?

Seeking to define Jewish community relations in 1954, Dr. Isaac Franck, Executive Director of the Jewish Community Council of Greater Washington (D.C.), ventured a global and a specific approach based on the imagined visit of a founding father of Jewish community relations:

So long as the discussion or activity related itself to some anti-Semitic organization, to anti-Jewish elements in a newspaper or magazine editorial or article, to anti-Jewish utterances by a public official, or to some cases of employment discrimination against Jews, our hypothetical founding father would find himself on familiar territory

He would be bewildered at the actual catalogue of issues then on the Jewish community relations agenda.

He would hear discussions of, and reports on activity in connection with immigration and naturalization laws; the Bricker amendment; methods and abuses of congressional investigating committees; individual civil liberties; academic freedom; church-state separation; religion and the public schools—including the problems of released time and of religious holiday observances in the public schools; the

distribution of Gideon Bibles through the public school; the attacks on the public schools; a Seventh Day Adventist's right to unemployment compensation if he refuses to work on Saturday; the rights of Negroes to eat in restaurants, attend theatres, use swimming pools and playgrounds; segregation of Negroes in public schools, in housing, etc.; home rule for the District of Columbia; Negro race labeling in newspaper crime stories; radio and television programs on different aspects of Judaism; support for the United Nations; and dozens of other such strange and bizarre subjects and activities.⁵

Dr. Franck's founding father would be even more bewildered in 1969. The agenda is infinitely more varied and complex, as it reflects social conditions in America. He would find us summoned to come to grips with the urban crisis, poverty, welfare, the racially disadvantaged, model cities, urban renewal, housing construction and rehabilitation, education, urban financing and other problems. In effect, he would find the profession of Jewish community relations moving in the direction of social engineering and he might well ask if all the programs and projects suggested these days are relevant to the basic concerns of the Jewish community. Do they, indeed, relate to the traditions, special skills, knowledge and capabilities of the Jewish community?

The newest and possibly most volatile issue to emerge on the American scene is the cry for decentralization of schools and neighborhood control. Already nine major Jewish agencies in New York have endorsed the concept of school decentralization. In a joint statement issued through the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York on March 20, 1969, the agencies called for "increased community participation in

⁵ Dr. Isaac Franck, "The Scope of Jewish Community Relations," *Jewish Social Service Quarterly*, Vol. XXX, No. 3 (Spring 1954).

the operation of our public schools." As other Jewish communities face this issue with considerable hesitancy and anxiety, we can raise the test of relevancy. Is this issue so relevant to Jewish concerns as to justify intervention in New York? Is it because we are persuaded that we must take our part and play a role in the "confrontation" to come? Do we so believe in the "creative use of conflict" as to believe that school decentralization and neighborhood control will produce the kind of quality education denied by past procedures? Have we convinced ourselves that a Jewish "presence," another "in" word, is essential to the amelioration of the crisis in education? Do we see in "participatory democracy" a magical formula for filling the gap left by other forms of democracy? I am persuaded that education per se, seeking high standard quality education for all, is an issue "relevant" to Jewish concerns. It is consistent with our own avid pursuit of education which has become a hallmark. Our traditions have long pointed to the values inherent in education. But our concerns, expressed from the standpoint of Jewish community relations, have been in the direction of teacher training, text-book criticism, desegregation and integration, more so than relating to school administration and financing. In essence, our interest in public education in America has been non-political. The issue of school decentralization, to many observers, has less to do with education and more with power, politics and control.

Addressing the Rabbinical Assembly in March, 1969, Professor Eli Ginzberg of Columbia University called on those assembled "not to see the Negro's quest for power and full equality as a racial issue." Warning that the upward thrust of the Negro community will create inevitable conflict with Jews, he said:

"When Jewish shopkeepers are forced to sell their stores in the ghetto, when large numbers of Negroes move into Jewish neighborhoods, when Negroes seek preferential treatment in the school system . . . many will feel threatened . . . it is wrong and dangerous for Jewish leaders to raise the cry of anti-Semitism when such conflicts occur." Describing the school strikes in New York as "a confrontation between black power advocates seeking local control of schools and union teachers determined to protect their economic and seniority rights," Dr. Ginzberg urged that the "strike should be seen as a Negro-labor union conflict, not as a racial-ethnic confrontation."⁶

In its analysis of school decentralization proposals in Detroit, on April 18, 1969, the *Detroit Free Press* editorialized: "However, the effect would be to fragment the Detroit school system, make vastly more difficult the shifting of students between schools . . . and probably result in even greater educational gaps between the educational opportunities offered in different areas of the city. Moreover, the bill would tend to perpetuate the status quo with respect to location of buildings and racial segregation and make even more difficult the overall improvement in educational programs that most parents want for their children."

It is doubtful that this issue, with all of its built-in tensions and conflicts, can pass the test of relevancy to the interests of the Jewish community. It poses another unresolved question, the role of the individual citizen versus his membership in a sectarian group.

In the paper previously mentioned, Dr. Franck set forth three major objectives of Jewish community relations programming fifteen years ago:

⁶ JTA *Daily News Bulletin*, March 20, 1969.

1. To defend the Jewish community and individual Jews, *as Jews*, from physical and propaganda attacks.
2. To prevent the imposition of discriminations and disabilities upon the Jewish community and upon Jews, *as Jews*, and to assure for them all the civil rights and equal treatment.
3. To assure the continuation and further development in the United States of the kind of social and political order in which the Jewish community will have the maximum freedom and opportunity for its development, and for its intellectual, religious, spiritual and cultural self-expression.

But lest these objectives be construed as an open door to programming in every direction, lest they be seen as removing distinctions between Jewish and general organizations on the American scene, Dr. Franck posed five questions seeking to get at the unique role of Jewish Community Relations agencies:

1. Does the problem before us have implications for the Jewish community?
2. Is it an important enough problem?
3. Can we get or do we have allies among the other religious and civic groups?
4. Is there some prospect of winning?
5. On any given issue, is our Jewish constituency really with us?

"These pragmatic criteria," Dr. Franck observed, "jointly applied, may help to throw a good deal of light on the limits at which our community relations activity has to stop, or at least pause for self-examination."⁷

In 1969, it is high time for us, who have accepted the responsibility, to pause and ask if our community of five million, facing an American population approaching three hundred million, should properly be charged with the tasks placed before it by Jewish community relations agencies. It has been observed that if a typical American Jewish community were to invest in its central

city the entire proceeds of one annual campaign, the impact and results would go unnoticed. Perhaps a more modest and quieter approach to the urban crisis on our part would be more in order.

In 1960, Arnold Aronson, Director of Program Planning of the NCRAC, traced the evolution of the Jewish community relations field through six stages: (1) the welfare stage, (2) the defense stage, (3) the education stage, (4) the intergroup cooperation stage, (5) the social action stage, (6) the community relations stage.⁸ What stage are we in now? The confrontation stage? The search for group identity stage? Discussing the future of the field in 1964, our late colleague Jules Cohen, former executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Philadelphia, predicted that the next fifteen years will see the field expand "from the level of community relations to the broader plateau of community service." He defined the latter as "taking positions as a community and otherwise actively participating in general social issues that do not necessarily have an inter-group relations component."⁹ Is Jewish community relations prepared for such a broadening of its stage? If we are we had better formulate our objectives for 1969 and find out what we have to sell our public.

When he took a "Twenty-Year Look" at Jewish Community Relations in 1964, Isaiah Minkoff, Executive Vice-Chairman of the NCRAC, said: "Pluralism is the highest form of democracy. It is based on the interplay of forces among communities and sub-communities,

⁸ Arnold Aronson, "Organization of the Community Relations Field," *Journal of Intergroup Relations*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Spring 1960).

⁹ Jules Cohen, "The Future of the Field of Jewish Community Relations," *Journal of Intergroup Relations*, Vol. XL, No. 4 (Summer 1964).

⁷ Dr. Isaac Franck, *op. cit.*

groups and sub-groups whether these be differentiated according to nationality, culture, ethnicity, religion or other factors making for common identification and common cause. These sub-groups have their differences and their individual conflicts . . . They have an overarching higher common cause—their interest in and their concern with the society of which they are an integral part. . . . This is the concept that we have to keep selling today and tomorrow and increasingly this will be our role in the future.”¹⁰

In commenting on basic assumptions in Jewish community relations, Dr. John Slawson, Executive Vice-President Emeritus of the American Jewish Committee, stressed the “changing composition of the human race” as crucial to program development in our fields. A world in which the ratio between Black and White continues to change requires shifts in emphasis in Jewish community relations, he suggested. Addressing himself to the assumption that “human rights are indivisible,” Dr. Slawson stated that “it is not the validity of this assumption that needs to be re-examined, but rather the role of Jewish community relations agencies and the nature of Negro-Jewish relations programs which flow from it.”¹¹ It is this re-examination of principles that our field so badly needs today.

While New York City remains the scene of conflict, there are examples from coast to coast of Negroes and Jews continuing to work together, not without difficulty, in a variety of projects aimed

at improving the quality of life in American cities. We should not expect leadership in Jewish community relations from non-Jews, but there are teachers among them from whom we can learn. Bayard Rustin, refusing to abandon cherished beliefs, is one thus depicted in *The New York Times*:

Rustin remains an integrationist, despite strong currents in the opposite direction within the black community—and despite white intellectuals and white liberals who approve of such trends on the grounds that this is what Black Americans want. “There’s no need to hold a finger to the wind to find out what people think, then agree with it,” Rustin told me adding, “*Spokesmen ought to educate their people.*” (my emphasis)

Jewish community relations, with more than sixty years of experience in working *against* anti-Semitism and for the full flowering of American society should have a continuing message for American Jewry. If we have not as a people abandoned as our goal, and I am persuaded that we have not, a free, equal, integrated and pluralistic society, we should be reaffirming that position loudly enough for all Jews to hear. The Central Conference of American Rabbis has called upon American Jews “not to abandon their traditional support for civil rights, despite the anti-Semitism of some black militants.” It may be appropriate for other groups so to speak out but it remains the special responsibility of Jewish community relations agencies to sound this note with endless repetition if necessary.

In reviewing *Portnoy's Complaint* in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, Granville Hicks noted this sentence: “My God! The English language is a form of communication! Conversation isn’t just cross-fire where you shoot and get shot at.” Perhaps this sentence is suitable for adoption by Jewish com-

¹⁰ Isaiah Minkoff, “A Twenty Year Look At Jewish Community Relations,” *Journal of Jewish Communal Services*, Vol. XL, No. 4, 1964.

¹¹ Dr. John Slawson, “An Examination of Some Basic Assumptions Underlying Jewish Community Relations Programs,” *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 2, 1959.

munity relations agencies to be flown from their mastheads. Community relations isn't just cross-fire either. If it is properly practiced, it must be a controlled procedure with goals ever present

for all to see. If it becomes just noise and exchange of epithets, adding to the din and discord, Jewish community relations will be neither "art" nor "discipline."