

## THE ROLE OF THE JEWISH SERVICE AGENCY IN AMERICAN SOCIETY \*

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FOR the purposes of this paper it may be well to start with the proposition that the Jewish service agency<sup>1</sup> is a fact—not a physical fact or a fact of nature, but a cultural or historical one. This means that it did not always exist, and much as we might dislike recognizing the possibility, it may not always exist. For the present, however, it is a cultural fact, which means that it is a fact with a past, a foreseeable future, and a *probable* future beyond that. The essential questions for us to consider then are the following: In the light of its past and its present function and cultural context, what is the potential future of the Jewish service agency? What cultural function does it serve today? How different is that function from those which it served at an earlier time? If important shifts in function have occurred in the past, is it possible or likely that they will in the future? Can we visualize “frozen” service agencies, immutable in their functions and not responsive to the changing cultural con-

text in which they exist? Or does the very term “cultural fact” mean a changing fact?

In these questions, it will be observed, some attempt is made to steer clear of wish fulfillment and of exhortatory ideas. There is no implication in them that change must be progressive in character or that it always involves what we regard as improvement over a formerly existing state. Moreover, there is not the slightest suggestion in them that possession of the right ideas by the right people will lead to any control over the future of the social institution which we know as the Jewish service agency. What is suggested is that once we accept a cultural fact *as a cultural fact*, as a datum of history, we can then examine it closely and try to see what we can learn from it. If it is a datum of current history, an existing social institution, we can examine it operationally, that is, in terms of how it actually functions now and try to observe ways in which that functioning might be transformed, through influences from within or from the outside, in other words, from other social institutions or forces.

Submitting the social institution in question then to a bit of functional analysis (by which we mean analysis that takes into consideration forces sustaining it as well as forces which it sustains) we must look at the function

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<sup>1</sup> As used in this paper, the term Jewish Service Agency does not include the Jewish center or Jewish schools. It refers to those agencies having a casework function or a function of services to individuals and families rather than a group work or educational one.

which it performs in a societal matrix, and this implies taking into consideration the function of other similar institutions. What functions does it perform which are like those of Catholic, Protestant, or non-sectarian agencies, or governmentally sponsored services available to the total populace? What functions does it perform which are different from those of any other type of agency? What functions, if any, which are unique?

One fact stands out, I think, namely, that there is much overlapping of function regardless of agency auspices. If there is anything unique about what the Jewish agency does (and I think that there is) it is certainly not *entirely* unique. Others offer family and marital counseling and so do we. Others place children and so do we. Others offer various kinds of health service and so do we. The very consistency in the services of all such agencies may indicate something with regard to the significance of these services for the wider society. If by some magic these services were to disappear, it seems safe to say that the wider society would recreate them or try to find substitutes for them. Less developed societies have managed without such services, but while it would be possible to do so in a modern society, there are probably few who would consider this desirable. As far as objective services are concerned, then, we see the Jewish service agency, along with others, carrying out a definite type of societal function.

There are people who do not want to look at the Jewish service agency in the context of its counterpart agencies representing other religious or secular groups in the total society. Maintaining that unless such agencies can demonstrate their special worth for the Jewish community they will wither on the vine, these people seem to see such services as the special creation of the Jewish community for its own members. The

uniqueness of the Jewish agency, they feel, must derive from this condition.

Whether they or we like it or not, however, the fact is that even the social services of Israel are related to those of the rest of the world. Their uniqueness is not to be found in their separateness, or in the separateness of the Jewish community. An incorrect assumption about both the nature of service and the nature of the community lies back of the search for *total* uniqueness. And this incorrect assumption blocks the path to discovery of what we are all interested in finding. Community and religion are not one and the same cultural fact, nor are social services and religion one and the same. Religion existed long before social services, as we know them today, and communities can also exist without social services.

It would take us far afield to go into the nature of the Jewish community and it is not necessary for our purposes to do so. Perhaps it can be agreed, however, that the Jewish community (wherever it exists, including Israel) is part of a wider community. In America it exists in a context of other religiously oriented and also secularly oriented communities, all of which have open boundaries, so to speak, and are therefore subject to influences from one another. They are sometimes resistant to such influences, but this does not alter the fact that they are subject to them. Nor does it change their wish, in many instances, to alter the other while remaining themselves unchanged.

It is possible to picture the Gestalt which results somewhat as shown in Figure 1, on following page.

Does this picture relegate the Jewish community to an insignificant role in the scheme of things? And does it make its social services still less significant? Does it make us utterly dependent on others? Do we derive our significance from them, and must we see ourselves

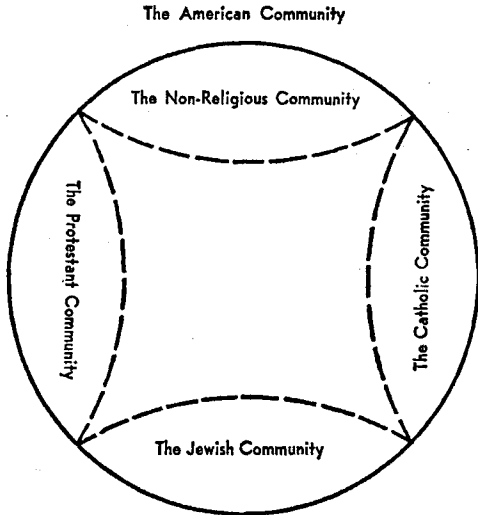


FIGURE 1.

as one out of many, a small part of the many and therefore lost in the social picture? I do not think so, and the reason why I do not is that I conceive of social services and their role in community life differently. If we see the Jewish community (or for that matter, any other community) in unidimensional terms, the conclusion is inescapable that when its numbers are small and when it is dependent on others for its functioning, its role in the larger society must be insignificant. When we recognize, however, that modern communities are not uni-dimensional and that they are in fact multi-dimensional,<sup>2</sup> then we must come to a different conclusion. Furthermore, when we see the social services of any community as not simply one of the products of that community, but rather as *one of the dynamics of community growth*, then our perspective must change.

We American Jewish social workers have spent many years justifying and defending ourselves from a kind of imaginary enemy. Feeling that we must develop a rationale for our work, and

that this must be in terms of its contribution to the survival of the Jewish community in America, we have posited first that the Jewish community is in danger—it will not survive unless something is done about it. We have assumed that there is a weakness in this community and an enormous strength outside of it, which it cannot successfully combat. If we, who are part of it, could demonstrate that we hold the keys in this situation, then surely the community would think well of us—our support would be assured. Where are the keys? We have sought them in Jewish content and again in Jewish values, and in a few instances we have made important finds. With respect to Jewish center programs<sup>3</sup> and Jewish education,<sup>4</sup> we have found a way of combining our past with the present and of making the past meaningful in the present, and the search, therefore, must be looked upon as a fruitful one.

With respect to Jewish family and children's services, or health services, however, the task has proved a more difficult one. We can find justification in the past and a basis for continuity in the present,<sup>5</sup> but we still cannot operationalize it, as it is possible to do in the field of Jewish center work or Jewish education. We must rely more on words than on deeds and the deeds speak louder than the words.

<sup>3</sup> Irving Canter, "What Research Tells Us about Training for the Jewish Components in the Practice of Group Work in Jewish Settings," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 3 (Spring, 1963), pp. 266-85.

<sup>4</sup> Albert P. Schoolman, "The Study of Jewish Education in the United States," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 1 (Fall, 1960), pp. 35-47.

<sup>5</sup> David Zeff and Irving Greenberg, "The Jewish Casework Agency: Problems and Prospects in a Time of Paradox," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. XLII, No. 1 (Fall, 1965), pp. 49-59.

<sup>2</sup> Roland L. Warren, *The Community in America*, Rand-McNally and Co., Chicago, 1963.

At this point I should like to say that I personally believe our need for justification and defense is unfounded. The insecurity which we feel may be characteristic minority insecurity, and in the case of a people which has suffered the reverses which Jews have experienced over the centuries, it is certainly understandable. More than that, it is perhaps inevitable. Nevertheless, I believe the need for justification and defense is unfounded, as far as the realities with which the Jewish service agencies are dealing are concerned. There is nothing which puts one in a weak position more than thinking that one is weak. Seeing older brothers and sisters as strong and faring well, the growing child sometimes despairs of ever being like them. What he needs to do, of course, in order to be "like them" is to be unlike them, in other words to be himself. He needs to grow *in his own manner* and to attain strength and adulthood, not by imitating them, but by finding his own distinctive capacities which are often very different from theirs.

Perhaps this is what the Jewish service agencies need to do. Instead of trying to get on the bandwagon, crying out, "We are like you," what they might profitably do is to say to departing brothers and sisters, "Go your way—it is right for you. Our way will have to be a different way and we shall find it." Such a statement requires a bit of security, but it is a security, I submit, which is not unwarranted.

Am I suggesting, then, that it is futile to search in the past, to look at our heritage and the values which were affirmed by it, for our justification? I would not want to give anybody the impression that I do not value history or that I think we can depart radically from it. What I am saying is that we must understand history, we must know how religions, values and cultures transform themselves, how in the great strug-

gle they need not get lost but instead may emerge more strikingly than ever before. What we must *not* do, however, is to hold onto the past as though it were the present. Our past *raison d'être* is not our present one, and our present one cannot be that of the future. We must know the processes of social change, we must see our agencies and their services in the stream of change, we must know that we cannot stop them from growing, for grow they will and in their own manner. We must know the nature of their growth, we must respect it, we must take it for what it is and not wish that it were something else.

It is the latter which I am afraid we have been doing in Jewish service agencies for some time. Observing them grow in a manner which we do not quite understand, almost like a non-musical parent who sees his child becoming a musician, or a non-intellectual one whose child takes to the realm of the intellect, we find ourselves puzzled and feel that we should step in. But what will we do then? Will we tell him about the risks of a musical career or the advantages of material goods and wealth? Both are true of course but there are other truths to be reckoned with. What we might do more safely and with more advantage to the child and ourselves is to observe the true character of his development, know it and cultivate it to the extent that we can, and in so doing know that our control over it will be partial.

It may be argued that agencies and services are not people, that we certainly can mold them more according to our own image than we can an unruly child and that the approach suggested is a passive, do-nothing one. Far from a "laissez-faire" approach, however, what I am trying to suggest here actually puts a great responsibility upon all of us. It requires, among other things, that we

cast off what must be recognized as neurotic, or if not neurotic then minority insecurity, in the first place. Until that is accomplished we will talk in vain and in circles. Secondly it requires that we take on an enormous responsibility—the responsibility for analyzing both the functional consequences and the transformations in service which are taking place before our eyes. We will not control them because they cannot be controlled by us. We may *influence* the direction or the character of their development, however, and that places still a third type of responsibility on us.

About the first of these responsibilities perhaps little needs to be said. To the extent that we recognize defense as over-defense, perhaps we will be willing to abandon some of it, momentarily at least, and turn to more productive pursuits. With respect to the second type of responsibility, however, namely the responsibility to use what resources we have available to analyze what I have called the functional consequences of the services we render, much more needs to be said.

What happens, for example, when a Jewish child is brought to a Jewish agency for placement? What happens to the family, to the Jewish community, to the wider society? What happens when a Jewish family comes to a Jewish family agency for family therapy? What happens to the family itself, to the Jewish community, to the wider community? What happens when services are offered in a health setting to Jewish, or non-Jewish clients, as the case may be? Do we know anything about the sociological consequences? Have we troubled ourselves to find out? If we were to do so, is it possible that these services, even where they were not totally “successful,” which is likely in a majority of instances, would still be highly valued by the family itself, the Jewish community and the total society? Would

the reasons for their valuing them be good reasons? Or would they be rationalizations for the maintenance of a bad state of societal affairs? Would research give us all the answers? Obviously it would not. But it would give us some of them and combined with intelligent action-oriented thought, it would give us a new basis for evaluation and re-evaluation of the service agencies, the services which they are currently rendering and the direction in which they are moving, in other words, transforming themselves.

Perhaps I should say here parenthetically that I do not mean to suggest that services literally and without human intervention of any kind “transform themselves.” What I am trying to say is that they are not dependent on us, and us alone, for their transformation. What is taking place in the community outside, in other agencies, Jewish and non-Jewish, determines the form of our services, perhaps just as much as our own opinions and ideals. No Jewish agency, or for that matter any other kind of agency, resides in a vacuum. It is subject to influence, from within and without, and it necessarily reflects its community and societal environment. It does not determine these, except within limits. It is, however, in large measure determined by them. This is what I mean in my reference to services transforming themselves. We are subject to and influenced by what other (Jewish and non-Jewish) agencies in the community are doing. Our services will not stand still as long as others change or develop, nor will theirs as long as ours are in the process of growth and development.

Must we go through long and laborious processes of research, then, in order to know what we want? Perhaps there is no alternative as far as *some* of the answers are concerned. Those which should be based upon our understanding of the

current social setting in which our agencies function certainly require research. But those which have to do with understanding of our past require less in the way of research and more in the way of orientation to the past. One without the other, however, is insufficient. Our cause arises out of the past. Our function is a present one. The service agency must be understood in *both* ways. It receives support on both accounts, and its contribution is of this same dual character. Our discussions in the past of the Jewish service agency and its relation to the Jewish community have emphasized cause. We have yet to turn to functions and their significance for both the Jewish and the non-Jewish community. Porter Lee's conception of cause and function in social work has as much validity for us as it does for any other kind of social work.

Opponents of the functional school of social work may find this idea a bit difficult to take. However, it should be made clear that what we are referring to here is an understanding of function in the *sociological* sense and not in the sense of social work technique or practice. What is of interest to us, sociologically, is the *consequence*, that which follows from a given service, not how one administers or carries out that service.

In looking to the sociological consequences of services offered by Jewish agencies, what do we find? There are few hard, confirmed facts available to us now, but there could be many if we were to see such research as essential to what we need to know about our agencies, about donors, users of service and the reactions of the rest of the community (Jewish and non-Jewish) to the possibility of their withdrawal or extension, transformation, etc. We could learn not only how these services are regarded but what their purposes should be, as seen by those who look at them from different vantage points. Is the Jewish

community as a whole proud of them and does it wish to offer them as an important part of its contribution to the life of the whole community, or does it feel saddled with them and wish that it were unnecessary to carry them along with other burdens? Would the Jewish community like to get rid of family counseling? Or does it feel, as the owner of a fine painting sometimes does, that even though he does not understand it as the artist does, it nevertheless contributes to his happiness? Is pure reason involved in our support of health services? Everybody knows today that such services can be carried out well under public auspices, and that the total public would not shirk its responsibility to Jews or other groups. Nevertheless, we not only hold onto them, but we continue to take great pride in them as Jewish offerings, even when only a minor part of the total cost comes from Jewish funds. Obviously there are consequences of some kind which follow from the very existence of such services under Jewish auspices. Why not find out what they are? Why not find out what the total community, not just the Jewish one, thinks about our services?

Why not find out, too, whether we ourselves really believe that we are spending our community's money wisely on present-day family, children and health services? Could we do better, in our own judgment, with different forms of services? Let us eschew anything approaching rationalization and ask ourselves first, whether existing services, under our auspices, are being administered both as effectively and economically as they could be under total public auspices, or for that matter non-sectarian private auspices. Let us try to be really objective and consider whether substituting other services for existing ones would be in some ways fairer to the contributing public. We are all aware that in some agencies, under certain sys-

tems of accounting, a counseling interview costs nearly twice as much as the same interview would if held by private practitioners. Do we believe that agency services are that much better and that there are incidental benefits to be derived which no private practitioner can offer? If so, let us declare our reasons and to the extent that we can do so back them up with facts.

It is this type of analysis of services that might be thought of as a functional one, that is to say, an analysis which measures results in terms of benefits derived by various parts of the total community, not users alone, donors alone, administrators or practitioners but all of them—not a segment of the total community but the total community itself—not the Jewish community alone, but the Jewish community in context.

There might be many who would fear such an analysis, but I personally see no need to fear it. We often fear that which is good for us, and I think this instance would be no different from many others. For what would happen in it, I believe, is that we would find a *raison d'être*—not *the* reason or explanation for what we are doing or should be doing, but a substantial explanation—an explanation which would take us beyond the attempts we have made so far to find a rationale for the Jewish service agency.

The interests of professional administrators and practitioners would go beyond those of the researcher in this situation. Both would want to make use of the results of such research rather than to pursue other research interests stimulated by it. Both, as professional social workers, would also welcome the broadening of perspective which it might provide and they would want especially to reorient their services and procedures to whatever the research indicated. In so doing they would be faced, of course,

with the fact that other religious or non-sectarian agencies would not necessarily be doing the same thing at the same time. In other words, they might find themselves ahead of their counterpart agencies—more in tune with what the community needed but perhaps out of step with what others were doing at a given time. That, of course, might not make for good public relations, but it would be an advanced professional contribution. It would be, in a very real sense, what many of us like to think of as the essential creativity of the Jewish people, which of course does not deny the creativity of others. Whatever the sources of such creativity might be, we do think of it as one of the facts of Jewish life—a fact which sometimes causes us trouble but one which also gives us some of our distinctiveness among the peoples of the world.

Is it presumptuous of us to think of ourselves as a creative influence in the world of social service? Certainly it is not presumptuous to want to be that kind of influence, for our own sake and for the sake of others. It is wrong to think of ourselves as having attained the pinnacle of development in the short space of fifty years. There is much to be studied, much to be formulated and reformulated, much to create. So far the conditions of creativity in the professional world we occupy have been set for us. They have been determined by the world outside to which we have made a certain adjustment. But the adjustment we have made so far is not one which puts stress on what is *characteristically* Jewish. Can it be? Research directed toward this end could tell us.

The question might be raised, for example, and answered by research, as to whether there is any such thing as Jewish casework. There are many excellent caseworkers, and Jewish ones too, who maintain that there is not. There are equally good caseworkers, however, who

do not consider the question an absurd one. It is not merely semantics or questions of definition which are involved here so much as it is a matter of understanding of the role of culture in the casework process. If there is no Jewish culture, but only an American one or a Western one, then there certainly can be no Jewish casework. If there is a Jewish culture, highly influenced, it is true, by the American one which contains it, but nevertheless an identifiable entity, then there is the possibility, at least, that this culture would play an important role in casework and in counseling or therapy. Those who have had opportunity for professional social work experience in cultures radically different from our own, know the extent to which any professional helping process is influenced by such a culture. In a culture where offices and appointments are practically unknown, one where continuities in experience are not stressed, one where individual responsibility plays an entirely different role from what it does in our own culture, one where discrete units in time and space blend together so that what is distinct for us is altogether indistinct for those who live in such a culture, our highly structured and continuous type of casework process requires enormous adaptations, if indeed, it is to be applicable at all. Where the differences are so great, it is not difficult to see the role played by culture in not only the content of the interview but the very shape and form of the process itself. Where there is less noticeable difference, we find it difficult to think in terms of cultural influence on the process. With respect to the content of interviews it is less difficult to see such influence, but the process, it is contended, remains the same. Those who feel differently about it raise the question as to whether the process remains the same because the helping person knows no other way and

therefore determines the form which the process will take. They raise a further question, too, namely, whether if content and process bear a relation to each other, the process would not be different if the helper were sufficiently aware of the cultural significance of the content.

These questions are of interest to us only in that they point to a problem yet to be explored and one on which Jewish service agencies in particular could make an exceedingly important contribution, regardless of what the answer might be. Representing a culture as well as a religion, the Jewish service agencies are strategically situated to make such a contribution to the profession. That new avenues, new ways of conducting themselves might be opened up to them too, is not an impossible result of the expenditure of energy which would be required in an objective inquiry of such a character. To see this creative opportunity is to recognize a professional responsibility.

There is one other professional responsibility which I would like to discuss here, namely, the role of the Jewish service agency in the making of policy. For years the Jewish service agency has been seen as having little to do with policy, except, of course, policy pertaining to its own internal operations. The reasons for this might be found in a misconception concerning the nature of policy and the manner in which policy-making takes place. With the development of great interest in policy-making in the realm of social welfare and with the study of the processes through which policy on the widest basis is established and set into motion, it becomes apparent that the Jewish service agency, along with others can have a most significant role in the determination of policies which it may not carry out directly itself but which impinge on its services or may be required to complement them.

Of course Jewish agencies have always



participated in welfare councils and have even given testimony derived from their caseloads. What is referred to here as policy-making, however, involves a great deal more than participating in the work of planning groups or giving testimony before legislative groups. What is required instead is careful study of services in light of present social policy which is often cloudy and ineffectively formulated, further study of what functions might be performed by such services if a different policy outlook were to prevail, study of the forces blocking the development of more enlightened policy, study of means to achieve action toward the development of desirable policy, study of ways to establish such policy on an effective basis, and finally of ways to translate it into actual service.

A great deal of study is indeed involved and a great deal of expenditure in time, energy and money. Can the Jewish service agency use its resources in such a manner? Should it do so? Does it have an obligation to the Jewish community to do so? Will its services grow and develop as we would like to see them if it does not actively participate in this manner in the making of policy? Are the interests of Jewish clientele and the Jewish community always identical with those of the rest of the total community? If they are not do we set them aside and quietly forestall action by others or do we actively engage in the determination of policy which is consonant with the demands of the services which we represent? The questions raised here are not political ones. They are professional ones, and they are crucial for the development and the direction of service agencies. Social policy in some form or other determines everything our agencies do. In perhaps more instances than

not, it is policy which has not been thought out carefully, submitted to scrutiny and shared with those who are to work with it and work under it, but instead hastily and arbitrarily conceived, referred back to no professionally established principle and enacted without study of possible consequences.

Enough is known about policy today to make it possible for service agencies to play a different role from that which they have played in the past. They can play a creative role and they can help to shape the environment in which they must function. In so doing they can do justice to themselves, the Jewish community and the general community.

In conclusion, I should like to point up the essentially dynamic character of the roles of the Jewish service agency which have been outlined here. I have not attempted a justification for this type of agency, have not tried to establish it on a basis of time-honored Jewish values,<sup>6</sup> which has been done most ably by others, nor have I attempted to abstract it from its present living context. Instead I have attempted to see it as a sociological fact, as a social institution, as a living, growing, developing and changing institution, as a self-examining one, as a creative and contributing one, as a professionally responsible one. I have tried to suggest that our attention should be shifted from interest in the past to the future and that this would automatically take place with analysis of the social consequences of services which we are rendering now. When such a shift of interest and action actually takes place Jewish service agencies will have moved on to a new stage of security and significance.

<sup>6</sup> Alfred J. Kutzik, *Social Work and Jewish Values*, Public Affairs Press, Washington, D.C., 1959.