Some Thoughts on the Polity of Jewish Organizational Life

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The proliferation of lay boards and committees, sub-committees, ad hoc *committees, task forces, "concerned" members, advisory councils and citizens panels are the source of much frustration to professionals in Jewish public service. Even when such groups do their work well, remaining within well-defined areas, the demands they make upon professional staff time concerned with their nurture are considerable.*

Is the system which has grown among Jewish groups in this country the most appropriate? Are there other governance models to choose from?

A NY group, from two on up, will establish some form of governance, even if it is not aware that it is doing so. When the queen bee in a hive dies, one of the drones is eventually promoted to queen status. The married couple which places the husband in charge of foreign relations ("What should we be doing in Central America?" "Should we support the Afghanistani rebels?") and the wife in charge of domestic relations ("Should we buy a car?" "Where will the children go to school?") has established a system of governance, which, despite its surface approach of equality of roles, has placed the wife effectively in charge of the family. Governmental *troikas* eventually define one member as *primus inter pares*.

Groups establish checks and balances upon their leadership. The most obvious example is that of the American system of executive, legislative and judicial branches. Less obvious, but equally a check and balance system, was the biblical king-priest-prophet triad, or the post-biblical monarchy-priesthood-rabbinate system. These triads worked best when each element was kept in balance, and failed when the balance was lost. (Such was the case with King Alexander Jannai who was a *kohen* who tried to absorb both the monarchial and priestly functions into his one person.) Jewish organizational governance generally assumes that a board sets policy and a professional administers it. This is roughly analogous to the American practice of civilian control of the military, or congressional oversight of Executive Department actions.

Is this the only system available to us, and if not, is it the best? What other models might we look at?

The Proprietary Model

In this governance model, a sole proprietor or group, sets up an institution which sells its services to the Jewish consumer, for profit. The private *hadarim* (Hebrew schools) of the early 1900's, private Hebrew tutors today, private health clubs with largely Jewish memberships, congregations "owned" by entrepreneur rabbis, and private practice social workers with Jewish clientele all fall into this model in some fashion.

The weaknesses of the model are all too obvious—pandering to the debased tastes of the public and a cheapening of product. The *hadarim* were often little better than crash course bar mitzvah factories.

But the profit motive has a salutary effect upon waste and overstaffing. Only services which sell are provided, and these in the most efficient manner. The Jewish social worker in private

practice, though lacking the mandate to be guided by Jewish principles, is often effective in producing as good social work results as private, non-profit agencies. While it may be argued that non-profit agencies are more likely to offer "loss leader" Jewish programming, the fact of the matter is that little of this takes place except in ideological institutions such as synagogues and schools which are already committed to Jewish programming. The unattended Sabbath morning service in our example above is a "loss leader," as is the under-registered high school class. Neither of these would be offered in a proprietary institution except if there were a demand for them. Therein lies the key to use of a proprietary model for the governance of some, but not all, Jewish institutions. Where demand exists—physical recreation facilities or intensive pre-bar mitzvah day school education, for example—the proprietary model might be worth a try to the extent that it eliminates the weaknesses of other governance systems. To the objection raised that schools cannot be self-supporting, we feel that that is simply not true. Many deficits are created by uncoordinated lay demands upon schools.

The Corporate Industrial Model

Corporations are generally governed by a small board of directors nominally elected by the owner-shareholders, but actually perpetuated by top management. Management is also incorporated into the board in a voting capacity, unlike the ex-officio status of most Jewish executives on their own boards. The problem of blurring of roles between management and "lay" leadership is dealt with by assigning ascending levels of authority to different levels of management, with few problems being allowed to rise up the hierarchy, except

on appeal, and rarely to the board level. Thus, the foreman may have authority to hire and fire hourly workers within the limits of budget, union contract and personnel practices. Exceptions to the policy might reach the level of division director, but are rarely seen by the president and certainly not by the board. Expense items are often indexed, so that lower level staff can expend, within the limits of their budget, up to X dollars on their own initiative, with Y dollars requiring purchasing manager or division director approval, and Z dollars going as far as the chief corporate executive.

Only broad policy matters ever reach the board—patent applications, licensing agreements, large capital expenditures, corporate acquisitions, large budgetary shortfalls or greater than expected income, and so forth.

The strengths of the system are obvious. The corporation and its board are rather single minded in purpose. Despite all the talk about civic responsibility, creating a better life through science or widgets, or whatever the company produces, profits remain the single goal of the corporation. A management which reaches that goal is usually rewarded and retained. A management which falls short, despite all good reasons such as recessions, strikes, or competition, is ultimately slated for removal by stockholder revolt or by merger, no matter how well entrenched it has made itself. The weaknesses of the system are also apparent. It leaves little room for popular participation (we shall differentiate between popular participation and democracy below) except to the extent that corporate customers vote with their feet, by patronizing the competition. It encourages at times cheap, short-term solutions rather than long-term growth. A dollar not sunk into research and development shows up in

the balance sheet as a profit this year. Put into research, it might turn a profit years ahead, but does nothing to make current management look good.

Could the strengths of such a system be isolated and applied to Jewish organization polity?

The Participatory Democracy Model

The best examples of this model come not from American Jewish organizations, but from the *kibbutz* or from the New England town meeting. Direct contact between the leadership and the led is maintained through frequent meetings which deal with even the smallest details. Shall the *kibbutz* build a swimming pool or give each member a television set, or do both, or neither, but plow surplus funds into a milking machine? What brand of milking machine? What brand of television? Policy questions on the changing nature of *kibbutz* society share equal time with management questions such as the diagonal size of the TV screen. Elected or appointed leaders are actually managers under these circumstances. These people seek to define the will of the majority and act accordingly.

The model is a superb one for those willing to dwell in the glass house of communal living, and to share in both its successes and failures. The model begins to founder when the institution gets too large to manage by consensus or, as in a free society, where losers on a particular issue are free to pick up and go elsewhere. The cooperative school and the *shtibel* synagogue where everyone pitches in come closest to the model of participatory democracy, though in both these institutions, disaffected parties are more likely to walk away from the game than either *kibbutz* members or residents of a Nineteenth Century small New England town.

The Model of Representative Democracy

American government polity is based on this system. The franchised electorate periodically selects representatives who presumably will act in accordance with the will of the majority of their constituents. The system, as Winston Churchill observed, is the worst of all governance patterns, except for all the rest. It encourages representation by finger-to-the-wind consciences. It breeds the growth of pressure groups who try to give the impression of stronger than usual wind. Political compromise and trade-offs are its hallmarks, with consistency of policy the usual loser. The system is slow to react, slow to change yet flighty, and very cumbersome. But for governmental purposes, it is probably the best of all worst systems. The fact that the United States of America, that youngest of all republics, is the oldest such democracy in the world, bears eloquent testimony to the staying power of this system. Many Jewish organizations use this governance model. They may err, in that what is appropriate to an amorphous nation may not work properly for an organization which proceeds out of a particular ideology or mission.

The Model of Populism

The line between various democratic models and populism is a thin one. Populism, except for a brief period when it was represented by an American political party, means "purporting to represent the rank and file."

Most Jewish community executives have observed manifestations of populism in the form of communications from "concerned members," or "concerned parents." The pressure group generally purports to represent a rank and file consensus with a griev-

ance, but, whether it does or does not will not be ascertained until the executive takes a positive action or takes no action. What he does may indeed be responsive to a consensus, though it often will elicit an opposing consensus from a different group of concernees. The technique of packing an open board meeting with speakers for or against a proposal is typical of populism. The intention is to convince the board that there is a demand, when in fact the counter demand is also out there, though it is not represented at the moment. Populism thrives on petitions, registered letters, publicity, parlor meetings, threats to withhold funds, and vacillating lay and professional leadership. Populists will often complain of "lack of communication" or "failure of communication" in Jewish organizational life. In fact, what usually has taken place is that there is much too much communication, or the wrong type of communication directed to the wrong people. Populism sometimes withers when ignored, but at other times it degenerates, particularly if it has received past encouragement, into mob rule. In our view, it is one of the two most common illnesses of Jewish organizational life. The other is apathy and the lack of involvement of most members. This is the mirror image of populism.

The Model of Benevolent Despotism

In this model, the organization is in the hands of a well entrenched executive, or is dominated by a single layman or group, which makes all major decisions. Sometimes the despot has purchased his position with massive philantrophic or professional contributions. More often than not however, power is maintained by a combination of bullying tactics and membership apathy. Many professionals prefer this type of organizational structure. The locus of

power is clear; the number of lay leaders requiring care, feeding of ego, and other nurturing is limited. If the professional captures the fancy of the despot, or if he himself is the despot, he can devote most of his energies to the presumed benevolence of his programmatic mission.

Discussion

We could describe other governance forms. Jewish professionals and involved organization members will probably recognize their own organizations among these lines.

The question then is the appropriateness of one model over the other. Perhaps there is no one appropriate model for all Jewish institutions. We maintain however, that most Jewish organizations make some vague obeisance to an undefined form of participatory or representative democracy, and then proceed to act within the populist or despotic models. It is this lack of definition which is ultimately responsible for membership disaffection, executive turnover, personnel shortages, and in some cases, higher than necessary executive salaries.

The by-laws of most Jewish organizations are rather specific about how many board members there are to be (usually too many) and how they are to be selected. They are usually vague on the organization's mission and utterly silent on the division of lay and executive responsibility.

There is an essential difference however between most Jewish organizations and the American governmental system upon which they base their governance. That difference is ideology. A synagogue, a Zionist organization, or a school usually grow out of a particular ideological stance. Ths is unlike American government which is rooted in the two party system, which itself is of vague ideology. With an ideological given, fre-

quent revision and reinvention of the wheel are unnecessary. The synagogue which gives representation to those who do not attend services on its ritual committee is guilty of subverting its own stated purpose, despite its good intentions about meeting individual needs. Of late, schools have been leaving the ideological mold and jumping onto a communal bandwagon which seeks to accommodate a broad spectrum of idiologies under one educational roof. Aside from the educational issue this raises—is monolithic consistency or societal potpourri a better educational model?—one gets the impression that "communal" is simply a euphemism for broad spectrum Conservative ideology. One astute observer has said that community schools are nothing more than Conservative institutions in communal garb, seeking a free ride on the Federation non-ideological gravy train, or perhaps Orthodox schools seeking the same ride without the need to go Conservative.

This then is a call for public discussion on these matters, painful though that may be. Professionals who are firmly entrenched in their positions and board members who lack a sense of institutional mission may object, but these two groups are greatly in the minority. Jewish life cannot afford the turmoil to which it is so frequently subjected. Nor can it afford the waste of highly trained personnel which it produces and then proceeds to destroy. The fact that similar problems occur in the general field is no consolation. The average life span of a large city school superintendency is eighteen months, according to one investigator. We suspect that similar statistics could be shown for Jewish life. An interesting sidelight might develop if the discussion of this problem were to include an investigation of the motives behind the large number of Jewish professional *olim* in Israel. (We suspect that

in many cases, there was more than merely the attraction of *aliya*.)

Churchill's caveat about the nature of governmental forms was presaged by Freud who, well before Hitler or Jonestown, pointed out that humanity reserves its worst rather than its best characteristics for its group activities. In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* he notes that

> a group is extraordinarily credulous and open to influence, it has no critical faculty, and the impossible does not exist for it . . . . The feelings of a group are always very simple and very exaggerated so that a group knows neither doubt nor uncertainty . . . . It goes directly to extremes; . . . . a trace of antipathy is turned into furious hatred . . . . a group is excessively emotional, impulsive, violent, fickle, inconsistent, irresolute . . . . an individual in a group (is seen) doing or approving things that he would have avoided in the normal conditions of life . . . . there is a lowering in each individual of his sense of responsibility for his own performances . . . . As regards intellectual work it remains a fact, indeed, that great decisions in the realm of thought and momentous discoveries and solutions of problems are only possible to an individual, working in solitude . . . . Minds of lower intelligence bring down those of a higher order to their own level . . . . The collective lowering of intellectual ability is avoided by withdrawing the performance of intellectual tasks from the group and reserving them for individual members of it.

Logic might appear otherwise. Act your best when your actions are open for all in the group to see, and reserve your worst for unobserved moments of privacy and concealment. Jews of all people should know better, yet we persist in our folly that wisdom is best adduced in groups, and difficult problems are best solved by multiplying committees and "task forces."

If Freud is right, then our approach to governance is wrong. Not only do we produce lowest common denominator answers; worse yet, in the process we bring out the worst in ourselves.

It is a point worth turning over to a committee to investigate.