

# THE THEATRE AS A FORCE IN JEWISH COMMUNITY LIFE \*

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## A Credo: Ani Ma-amin

**T**HE following general observations are the basic premises of this presentation: I believe that:

the culture of a people is expressed through the arts: literature, music, dance, theatre, and the graphic arts;

theatre is an important art form because it reaches deeply into the roots of human experience;

the Jewish community center has a vital role to play in the developing of community theatre under Jewish auspices;

the National Jewish Welfare Board should provide leadership to the community theatre movement through an effectively developed National Jewish Theatre Arts Council;

the future of Jewish cultural expression through the creative arts depends on the revitalization of a significant living theatre, deeply rooted in Jewish life; and

there are rich resources for Jewish theatre material in the creative genius of the American Jewish culture.

I am reminded of a Hassidic story about the yeshivah *bochur* who charged into the study room after 40 days of solitary contemplation with the announcement that a marvelous thing had happened to him for he had found a most significant *answer*. His fellow students showered him with congratulations and

welcomed him back to the scholar's table. But he said he must go back to study by himself, because now he must find an equally significant *question*.

This paper will attempt to raise the questions, to help stimulate discussion of the issues that face us.

## A Cultural Force for Survival

We begin with the proposition that the theatre must be a major force in Jewish community life. It is essential to Jewish survival. It deals with the realities of *Yiddishkeit*.

The theatre is one of the primary aspects of the arts, through which a people communicates its culture. Some years ago, Horace Kallen stated that "all cultures are most easily and directly communicated and most readily understood and appreciated through their arts." He urged at that time that "the Center should make the most of this fact." Without a Jewish theatre, live and dynamic, the culture of the Jew is in jeopardy. It is a challenge to the modern center to build Jewish theatre as an instrument for Jewish continuity.

When Judah Bleich came to Milwaukee, he shared with me his deep concern for the Jewish theatre as a dynamic factor in Jewish group survival. He had seen the decline and demise of Jewish theatre on the American scene. He was deeply pained by the disappearance of

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the Yiddish professional theatre and he sadly bemoaned the emptiness and futility of whatever remained of the Yiddish stage. Nevertheless, he recognized that theatre could serve as a great resource for Jewish life in the Diaspora and therefore he was highly motivated to develop Jewish theatrical expression in the English language. He was also inspired by the fact that there were in existence in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and one or two other centers, local community theatre groups which continued to perform in Yiddish on a high level of excellence.

#### **Contributions to American Theatre**

It is interesting to note that the American Jewish community has produced Jewish actors, directors, and other theatre personnel who are successfully integrated into the world of theatre arts. In our generation, the stage, the movie, the radio and television industries have had Jewish artists of high calibre and international fame. More recently, the Jewish theme has come to the forefront and plays of Jewish interest are more frequent on the New York stage. The Jewish "situation" is broadly accepted as suitable content within the overall culture and it has considerable box-office value as well. This does indeed represent a positive trend and is an example of the fact that Jewishness appears to have found a place in American literature and in other fields of art. It is commendable and should be encouraged in a free democratic society where all groups have the opportunity to create in their own cultural medium. It is equally refreshing to see the Jewish cultural content naturally integrated into American culture.

Norman Cousins suggests in a recent editorial in the *Saturday Review* that: "a free society cannot long remain free if man is in full retreat from man. For such a society pays a triple price if the

individual loses faith in his own centrality or in his ability to respond to creative beauty or in the stark fact of his ultimate responsibility." Each of us has the direct mandate to continue the creative pattern, striving for the essence of beauty, truth, and excellence.

#### **The Jewish Task**

However, American Jewish culture has a large unfilled task requiring the creative energy of the new generation of native-born American Jews to build a modern Jewish theatre that will communicate the values and ideals of Jewish living. Since the Jewish community should be profoundly concerned about the business of cultural survival it has to become increasingly aware of its stake in the Jewish theatre and its future. For indeed, theatre is a force in community life and its survival as an indigenous part of the culture represents a major challenge in our times.

#### **The Place of Creative Arts in Society**

As I see it, the basic objectives of art are: communication of ideas, transmission of values, achievement of creative expression, and striving for excellence. Through the meaningful participation of the individual in the arts, he contributes his leadership to the free development of cultural forms. In the field of Jewish culture, the individual makes use of art, to transmit to his generation those Jewish values that are a measure of his potentialities.

Norman Cousins points out an interesting commentary that makes this point more sharply, when he says that "one of the main propositions that had a certain vitality at the time this society was founded was that the individual man has a natural goodness inside him, that he is capable of responding to the truth, and that he is endowed with the capacity to recognize beauty, and *be enlarged* by it."

The cultural arts, therefore, contribute to the growth of the individual. The art of theatre demonstrates this fact with emphatic effect. Likewise, the Jewish theatre is a setting which provides the milieu for enlarging the capacities and the potentialities of the individual as a Jew. It is in this sense that I claim that the theatre is an essential factor in our cultural existence.

### Culture Challenge Under Freedom

The cultural challenge of our generation is of major consequence to Jewish survival. There are of course conflicting theories of survival. The "assimilator" operates on the assumption that the Jewish group should be absorbed into the general culture, take on the characteristics of the overall society, and gradually merge with other groups. The "integrator" suggests that the Jewish group can continue to function with other cultural groupings in one multicultural, integrated society. The "communal" approach is based on the idea that the Jewish group can best hope to survive as a community which projects its own culture and satisfies its own needs through significant group experiences related to its historic resources.

These cultural resources have been shifting rapidly in modern fast moving Jewish history. An entire segment of Jewish continuity was literally wiped out in Europe. Israeli cultural life emerged, with its fresh new dynamic pattern. The indigenous American Jewish community has been deeply influenced by local cultural factors, the open-minded nature of American society, the middle-class values and the effects of increased higher education of Jewish young people. Today we are more and more convinced that the unfilled need in the modern Jewish community is for a fresh approach through the arts to the

content and the style of life of the Jew. The cultural gaps can be bridged through intensive creative effort in art, music, dance and the theatre, based upon the realistic aspects of Jewish existence. The standards to be sought must be geared to the levels of excellence achieved in the general culture and must be related to the cultural needs of the Jewish community.

### Theatre and Its Role in Culture

But, what is the place of theatre in the matrix of cultural experience? In the history of the Jewish arts, the theatre group has had a significant impact on Jewish creativity. Drama has been deeply rooted in the fabric of Jewish sources, in its poetry, its legends, and its literature. In each generation, the theatre has colored the style of life of the people. It has served as a method of communication and it has provided a *modus of expression* for the individual. The theatre has been the vehicle through which the Jew became aware of the music and dance, the poetry and the mystery of the word, and the color of the stage with its moods and shapes. The theatre has been a living force in Jewish community, in one form or another, for many centuries.

In recent years, there was a major historical chapter when the Yiddish stage went through its great period of ascendancy and decline. Even in the indescribable agony of the last days in the Warsaw Ghetto, men and women gathered in the shadows to relive the beauty of the art of theatre. Wherever the Jew settled in the free countries of Europe and America, he brought with him the seeds of Jewish theatre. The major settlement in the United States made Yiddish theatre into a living force in the adjustment of the Jew to his new environment.

**The Jewish Community Center  
Builds Theatre**

The records show that the Jewish community center has had a long history of association with the living theatre. The YMHA and the early settlement houses, long before the WPA and for many years after, saw the importance of the dramatic arts for children, youth as well as adults. A basic principle, accepted early in the center field, emphasized the theatre arts as a tool for group experience. As the center has been increasingly recognized as a cultural instrument of the community, the place of theatre has become especially apparent.

In recent years the performing arts have received new prominence in group work, recreation and leisure time activity. The importance of creative skills in the communication of Jewish values has been widely discussed in the literature of the Jewish community center movement. Hence it is no surprise that a voluntary community theatre under Jewish auspices is growing up throughout the country under the aegis of Jewish community centers. This free wheeling theatre movement has within it the dynamic ability for experimentation and discovery of new channels and new techniques by which to create a theatre "for the people and of the people," responsive to the cultural needs of the modern Jew.

I have always been impressed with the vital potentialities of drama in the center, particularly as a factor in achieving the Jewish purposes and objectives of the center as an institution. Many of us long ago recognized the group service values of drama in terms of individual growth and social development of the participants. This, one might say, "goes without saying." However, it is equally clear that as an art form theatre does have a meaningful

influence on the Jewish group and on the Jewish person. The center is concerned with each of these impacts.

The field has progressed through various stages of development of center theatre projects. The dramatic arts used to be treated as "special interest" activity for a long time limited to a part-time classification, essentially providing a group service for various age levels. Classes in drama, dance, and stage craft were in effect aspects of the educational purposes of the center and at this stage these activities were primarily seen as cultural resources. However, some production units with the full scale traditions of a center-sponsored theatre workshops were often part of the picture. For many years, these production units concentrated on the successful Broadway plays and kept in tune with the times by maintaining a "hands off" policy with respect to Jewish theatre materials. Of course, these groups went through "Bury the Dead," "Awake and Sing" and "Of Mice and Men," popular reflections of the mood and times. Some classic plays of Jewish interest were occasionally presented, but not as regular theatre fare. The current years, since the end of World War II, marked a new trend in the center which soon became apparent in the field of theatre. The community theatre under Jewish community center auspices began to show concern about *Jewishness*. Today, the Jewish commitments have become a normal part of the theatre program in many centers. In an increasing proportion, centers are building drama departments with full-time trained staff able to deal with the problems of casting, promotion, budgeting and fund-raising as well as production. The new approach brings the theatre closer to the people by active community involvement at all levels of operation. The theatre groups are geared to reach out

into the community, to obtain financial support and to function on a sound business basis. While these projects must in the main continue to receive center subsidy, specific play productions are usually self-supporting. The theatre-goers have become loyal followers. Their continuing confidence makes the new theatre tradition possible.

It is significant to note that in the communities where Yiddish theatre groups existed these soon became an integrated part of the center's theatre arts program. In Cleveland and Milwaukee, the Yiddish production units worked closely with the English units and eventually found opportunities for collaboration, integration, and exchange of talents. Theatre art with Jewish content made itself strongly felt in the center field wherever leadership was found ready to build Jewish foundations into the framework of the community project. At first it took a certain amount of toughmindedness and courage, but it soon became clear that the Jewish audience had a sincere authentic intellectual identification with Jewish drama sources. In the meantime, modern plays of Jewish interest were successful on Broadway thus enhancing their appeal to Jewish community groups. Today there are several well-known Jewish community center theatre groups such as those in Cleveland, Detroit, Baltimore, Los Angeles, New York (92nd St. Y), Louisville, Newark, Philadelphia Neighborhood Center, Kansas City and Milwaukee. In past years, the Irene Kaufman Settlement in Pittsburgh, the Bronx House, Bronx YM-YWHA, Central Jewish Institute and Educational Alliance in New York, and some of the smaller centers around the country conducted theatre groups. It was pleasing to learn that Bronx House still sponsors a Yiddish production unit which performs occasionally. In Kansas City,

the YM-YWHA has had a long established tradition of resident theatre. The kind of exciting enterprise which motivates the community theatre group is contagious and it can spread throughout the length and breadth of the land. While many new center buildings still provide only make-shift stage facilities, there are some who have built complete theatre facilities that are truly adequate for this purpose.

Center theatre takes on many forms. In Seattle this year, the center production group will present an original opera version of "The Dybbuk." In Pittsfield, Massachusetts, a relatively small Jewish community will present a modern Israeli play, "Ha-ketubah" (the Marriage Contract) which some enthusiastic translator prepared for production while the play was still showing in Tel Aviv at the Ohel Theatre.

Of course, the community theatre should not replace informal dramatics with club groups, experimental theatrical programs by various age groupings for special occasions and festival celebrations, and any number of other drama projects geared to group services. These are established aspects of center tradition. The major production groups have also found it wise to broaden the scope of their own activity to include community service presentations for special events and celebrations, as well as mobile theatre projects offering presentations to organizations and clubs for unique occasions.

My own inclination is to see the center's theatre program as a broad inclusive unit, integrated with the general program of Center work. It should contain some or all of these ingredients:

- Children's theatre
- Youth theatre
- Drama classes
- Adult Drama Production Units  
(in English and Yiddish)
- Mobile Theatre (Suitcase)

Stagecraft Workshops  
Drama Workshops  
Special Events Presentations  
Club Dramatics  
Community Festivals and Pageants

A well-rounded drama program should be committed to various settings. There is no advantage in a limited, rigidly structured program. It needs room for growth, expansion, experimentation and discovery. It cannot depend alone on the formal stage presentation. Modern theatre includes the media of TV, movie, radio and these are excellent vehicles through which to communicate the values and standards of Jewish culture. It is equally an encouraging sign to note the inclusion of the dance movement in the expanding performing arts program of Cleveland's Jewish Community Center. In addition, the dramatic readings and play reviewing of drama workshops and similar experimental groups are to be commended.

#### **Creative Writing for Community Theatre**

A few years ago, some of us were considered too "visionary" and "off-beat" when we saw the possibility of combining efforts to foster the commissioning of new play material especially written for Jewish community theatre groups. We failed to obtain the usual quorum of ten to pool resources for this purpose. Recently, a group of centers were able jointly to sponsor the preparation of the movie "To Be as One," depicting the modern Jewish community center. Perhaps it is timely to reopen the issue of joint efforts to commission outstanding writers to create top level play material of Jewish cultural significance.

One of the important responsibilities we have today is to develop the kind of materials and resources for production of plays of meaning and value suitable for theatre under Jewish auspices. The

time is ripe for stimulating the modern writer by demonstrating that there is a market for materials of this type. This can be done by joint efforts to develop major commissioning of writers.

Recently, there have been some encouraging experiments to stimulate play writing through contests. New Haven has had some experience in this area and others have tried on a smaller scale. In a number of cases, plays or musicals have been commissioned locally.

It is clear, however, that the problem of suitable play material is a tough one to solve. One avenue has been to work for translations from Yiddish and Hebrew. This possibility surely deserves more time and effort. There are of course excellent materials available that can contribute to the repertoire of Jewish plays for community theatre groups. Similarly translation of Hebrew and English plays for use by Yiddish production units has its merits and has indeed proven successful when applied.

The challenge really is to the *writer* to create freshness of expression, authentic Jewish content, with insight and sensitivity to the currents of Jewish socio-cultural phenomena that permeate modern life, fitting into the social realities and the strivings of the present generation. This is a tall order, but the American-Jewish community certainly must have the talent to produce this kind of material. We will have to do more thinking about this soon.

#### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

My personal experience in this exciting area of center practice has convinced me that the center has it uniquely within its power to use the theatre as a force for Jewish cultural creativity and development. It can be a vital factor in preserving values, communicating ideals and enforcing Jewish survival.

## THEATRE AS A FORCE IN JEWISH COMMUNITY LIFE

The center stimulates participants and audiences in appreciating and sharing a great art form.

The center provides opportunity for intimate identification with theatre, literature and content.

The center permeates the "style of life" or the cultural existence of the community.

The center develops new moods and modes of expression for the individual in a changing society.

Is this looking at the theatre in terms too theoretical and visionary? Earlier this view may have been viewed with uncertainty. But, the past decade has seen enough movement to offer encouragement and positive signs that a rich and exciting Jewish community theatre is vitally needed in our modern Jewish cultural life. Experience has demonstrated this realistic fact: Jewish community life gains enrichment and spiritual strength through effective work in this area.

I would strongly recommend that a National Jewish Theatre Arts Council should be formed. If the centers are going to participate in the process of cultural renaissance through community theatre, more planning for the future is urgent. The recommendation to establish a National Jewish Theatre Arts Council has been mentioned on several occasions and has recently received attention in the Jewish press. The national body that is best equipped to lend leadership to the development of a Theatre Arts Council is of course the National Jewish Welfare Board, well known for its work in the cultural field in sponsoring the National Jewish Music Council, the National Jewish Book Council, and the Jewish Center Lecture Bureau. The NJWB is also the parent association of the Jewish community centers and the YM-YWHA's in this country.

Such a council could deal realistically with adequate study of the practical problems of Jewish community theatre. It could examine methods for encouraging new creative efforts and could provide a market for the promotion of Jewish play materials. The council could also promote scholarships and study grants to train personnel specifically for Jewish community theatre and of course serve as a national instrumentality to stimulate the development of local Jewish theatre groups under the leadership of the Jewish community centers.

In summation, I would conclude with an urgent plea that those who have gathered at this first Judah Bleich Institute of Living Theatre might constitute a nucleus to work together for the achievement of certain basic objectives, as follows:

1. to seek increased development of Jewish community theatre groups in the centers;
2. to encourage increased experimentation with play material of Jewish cultural value;
3. to stimulate efforts to write plays of Jewish content;
4. to work for the development of community theatre as a vehicle for Jewish cultural expression;
5. to encourage the development of full scale drama programming in Jewish community centers for children, youth and adults;
6. to continue joint efforts through institutes, workshops, conferences and seminars to exchange experiences and to build common bonds of cooperation among center theatre workers, lay and professional;
7. to endorse the recommendation that the National Jewish Welfare Board should be urged to sponsor a National Jewish Theatre Arts Council.

I believe that we can make strides together and go "from strength to strength." The future of the Jewish community theatre depends upon concerted action, devotion, and commitment. Through our combined efforts, the living theatre can grow and prosper as a dynamic cultural force in Jewish life.