

# A TIME OF NEED AND A VISION OF HOPE

## Jewish Continuity and the Jewish Family Service Agency

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*If Jewish identity is to be strengthened and preserved, then the strengthening and preserving of Jewish families must command a central role on the community agenda. By providing high-quality services to all kinds of families, Jewish family service agencies can strengthen the community's most important institution and help ensure Jewish continuity.*

The Council of Jewish Federations 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) radically refocused the organized Jewish community's view of itself. Most significantly, it brought the goal of Jewish continuity to the forefront of the communal agenda of the North American Jewish community. The purpose of this article is to outline the role of Jewish family service agencies in meeting that goal, based on the central premise that Jewish continuity rests upon the bedrock of strong Jewish families.

### THE PREMISE

The family is a community's most important — and ancient — institution. From the earliest portions of the book of Genesis to the present day, Jewish history has been marked by a clear, unambiguous emphasis on the centrality of the family; it has always been the bulwark of Jewish communal strength.

Strengthen family life and the community is strengthened. Unfortunately, the fundamental wisdom of this axiom has been

obscured in recent decades, and the result has been painfully obvious. Our community and Jewish survival are challenged because our families are overstressed, undersupported, and often in jeopardy of general systemic collapse.

Throughout our history, Jewish identity has been formed and primarily nurtured in families. If the family structure is damaged or destroyed in its ability to function constructively, then the core around which all other Jewish institutions depend is also diminished. Scholars, rabbis, and communal leaders agree on one essential truth—that it is primarily out of our day-to-day experience within the family that Jewish values, compassion, and religious observances are learned. If families are not supported, the community cannot survive.

### THE CHALLENGES

Our Jewish communities and families have changed a great deal over the years. The cross-sectional NJPS found that only 12.5% of all entirely Jewish households are composed of a married couple with children. The most common type of household found in the survey was that of a "core" Jewish person living alone. Alarming, it was found that from a statistical point of view, the modal family is a dual-income, inter-faith couple with children.

Many issues confront us today: evidence of family breakdown (an escalating divorce

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rate, family violence, and addictive behaviors), heightened family stresses (increased mobility and the loss of extended family supports, an escalating intermarriage rate, and economic instabilities), and social demographic trends (higher rates of infertility, increased assimilation, a faster pace of social change, and increases in the number of elderly). These issues did not arise overnight, and their causes cannot be entirely dealt with in the near term. A prompt refocusing of the community's effort is needed to bring these crucial issues to the forefront of the community's discussion and, by so doing, to begin addressing the root causes of the problems.

Historically, the definition of a family has changed in relation to broad societal changes. Agricultural societies demanded large extended families, whereas industrial societies required smaller, more mobile, nuclear families. Many futurists suggest that our post-industrial society will lead to varied family constellations, following a functional definition in which the family unit is defined by the activities it fulfills for its members. Because the definition of a Jewish family has undergone such great change, an approach geared to ensuring maximum flexibility of response by the community is crucial.

Jewish families today take many forms:

- the frail, homebound, older widow whose husband died 20 years ago and who wants to stay in her apartment even though she may be incapable of doing so
- the two-career couple in their mid-thirties who want children but just discovered that they cannot conceive
- the single-parent family with no local relatives on whom to rely for support
- the middle-aged unemployed couple facing the loss of their home
- the lonely and disabled single adult
- the gay or lesbian couple with or without children
- the unaffiliated interfaith family that is searching, but confused.

In many ways, these have become our "typical" families today. As there is no single definition of family, there is also no single method by which meaningful service to all of these families can be provided. Even the so-called traditional or nuclear family must today confront issues that few people dreamed about a generation or two ago. Although many families are actively involved in the community, others feel isolated and forgotten. These others may include solid, healthy, and caring families who want to affiliate but — even with two parents working — find that the "cost of living Jewishly," is too high. Other families must cope with the effects of disability, AIDS, and other chronic illnesses. Increasingly, divorce, domestic violence, substance abuse, economic strains, and other hardships are pulling apart our families.

Change is the only constant. To address these issues meaningfully, these challenges must, in turn, inspire new solutions and new means of organizing and delivering the services our communities provide. In the absence of a clear commitment by the organized Jewish community to enter into a new partnership with their local Jewish agencies to assist our families *throughout* the life cycle, the response to this crisis will be fragmented, ad hoc, and ultimately ineffective in meeting the underlying need of preserving Jewish survival.

Historically, these issues have often been clouded by judgments and preconceived notions that are impossible to justify rationally. We as a community take as a "given" the need to support Jewish families, but when confronted by a nontraditional family arrangement, for example, many of us wonder, "Is that the type of family we wish to support?"

Another troubling question is how to invest in supporting Jewish continuity (as expressed in the form of marriage and childrearing) and at the same time support families in a variety of different lifestyles. In fact, strengthening the Jewish community requires that we support *all* types of

families — both on behalf of the individuals who comprise these families and on behalf of the next generation of Jews. It is only through putting aside preconceived notions of what constitutes a Jewish family that our community can focus effectively on its basic task: ensuring Jewish survival. Jewish family agencies are uniquely positioned to help meet the goal of Jewish continuity through their role in helping strengthen Jewish families. No other community resource is as experienced or as knowledgeable in working to integrate people into the broader Jewish community.

### THE PAST IS PROLOGUE

When dealing with dislocation, dysfunction, and stress, Jewish family service agencies have developed an approach that has been honed and refined over the course of decades. Using licensed clinical social workers and other trained professionals, Jewish family agencies follow a process of problem identification, assessment, and action. Constant re-evaluation takes into account the individual, the family, the community environment, and the range of public, private, and Jewish communal services available.

The establishment and growth of human services in North America reflect traditional Jewish responses to human need, as adapted to American circumstances. Like other immigrant groups, the early generation of Jews in North America found a receptive political and economic environment for the development of their own welfare organizations. In Europe, medieval *chevrai kadisha* (burial societies) and special charity funds had already emerged to assist orphaned brides, widows, the sick, and strangers. In North America, Jewish social services began in 1655, when the first Jewish settlers of New Amsterdam were required to meet the condition that “the poor among them shall not become a burden to the West India Company or to the community, but be supported by their own nation.”

Throughout the 19th century, Jewish philanthropy expanded to include charitable

societies that helped sick immigrants; provided general relief to the Jewish poor; and offered free burial, assistance with dowries, fuel assistance, and care for the elderly. In this century, Jewish family agencies helped create the settlement house movement, pioneered child welfare services, and created sophisticated psychosocial interventions that have become the treatment models of choice throughout North America.

Services to the least fortunate members of our community continue to be provided, validating the long-held Jewish belief that assisting our brethren to live with dignity and without want — the performance of acts of loving kindness, as our Sages have put it — is one of the noblest services we can perform as a community. A community is judged by how it cares for those most in need. The Jewish family agency has traditionally served as the chosen instrument for the community's actions in this regard.

Jewish family service agencies today meet the five criteria that remain central to community-building for the future.

1. *respond to critical issues facing our community today:* Working in collaboration with other providers, Jewish family agencies meet the human service needs of Jewish families based on their historical role, sensitivity to communal issues, case management expertise, and philosophy of viewing the person in the environment.
2. *help people cope with life's changes by enhancing a sense of connectedness and Jewish peoplehood around life-cycle issues:* The loss of extended family and roots can result in a loss of Jewish identity. The Jewish agency has the skills and flexibility to develop new programs alone and in collaboration with other agencies that serve the entire Jewish community.
3. *provide high-quality comprehensive services:* Wherever applicable, Jewish family agencies meet the high, quality-driven standards of the Council on Accreditation of Services for Families and Children and/or the Joint Commission on the Ac-

creditation of Health Care Organizations—the two premier standard-setting bodies for health and welfare agencies.

4. *provide assistance to the entire Jewish community—affluent and poor, observant and unaffiliated:* Jewish family agencies show no socioeconomic or denominational preferences. They provide needed assistance to the Jewish poor and the middle and upper classes who prefer services provided by the Jewish community or who have insufficient access to other service providers. In many service areas, comparable programs do not exist in the general community (e.g., elder care), even if one could afford them.
5. *promote Jewish identity among Jews who do not feel Jewish and among Jews who want inherently Jewish services*

These criteria are expressed through the Jewish family service agencies' counseling and case management-based services, residential and in-home support services, and collaborative educational outreach efforts (generally referred to as Jewish family life education programs). By involving volunteers, clients, and the community-at-large, Jewish family agencies reach beyond traditional turf limitations to synagogues, federations, and outreach organizations serving the entire community. Knowledge that "the Jewish community was there" when someone's mother, brother, or child is in need of assistance can create a lifelong attachment to the community. That is an essential element of Jewish continuity.

#### THE VISION

The organized North American Jewish community is quite properly concerned about Jewish continuity. If Jewish identity is to be strengthened and preserved, the strengthening and preserving of Jewish families must command a central role in the community agenda. Often, though not exclusively, this will be reflected in the strengthening of local Jewish family service agencies. Jewish family agencies provide

successful outreach, family life education, and residential or in-home support programs that strengthen Jewish identity and provide a bridge to other cultural, religious, and educational institutions.

Although no one institution can guarantee the continuity of our North American Jewish communities or that our communities will be composed of strong Jewish families, these tasks will be significantly more difficult to achieve without the programs and services of Jewish family agencies. If Jewish continuity is to be strengthened, Jewish family agencies must play a central role in the community agenda, based on their Jewish humanitarian mission to strengthen Jewish individual and family life.

Note that these services can and should be rendered collaboratively and cooperatively. Just as Jewish family agencies offer a Jewishly meaningful service to their communities, so too should Jewish educational and cultural organizations call upon the expertise found in Jewish family agencies for their work in schools and synagogues, among pre-Bar and Bat Mitzvah youngsters, within camp and retreat settings, and in the emerging field of informal family-based Jewish education. On behalf of both "healthy" and "troubled" families, Jewish family service agencies may well be the singularly most underused resource that the Jewish community possesses.

As the 21st century approaches, North American Jewish communities must effectively address the many challenges facing the Jewish family. Barbara S. Hoenig (1992) of the Council of Jewish Federations states in *Jewish Environmental Scan: Toward The Year 2000*:

The norm will not be the nuclear family.... Emerging parenting alternatives will require new services. These types of new services include Jewish Family Life Education.... Services will be needed to replace extended families and family support systems. Federations and their agencies can support an ex-

panding range of initiatives....Programs can be directed to nuclear families, single-parent families, intermarried couples with and without children, and other partnerships, and to joint custody situations and 'stepfamilies'....

Formal Jewish education, including Jewish day schools is only one component.

Jewish family service agencies can help by providing services to all kinds of families. Examples of such services from existing programs in Jewish family agencies include the following:

#### **Programs on Inter marriage and Jewish Identity**

While screaming headlines ask, "WILL YOUR GRANDCHILDREN BE JEWISH?" (1992), Jewish family agencies are working with others to ensure that the answer will be "Yes." Outreach programs addressing such issues as interdating, intermarriage, and Jewish identity formation, often co-led with rabbis, exist in virtually every Jewish family agency in North America. These programs help individuals and couples recognize the issues they need to consider, think through the consequences of the decisions they make, educate them about Jewish life, and provide legitimate, meaningful avenues back into the Jewish community. Similarly, the Jewish dimension of counseling services, adoption programs, residential care, family life education, and other agency programs has been re-emphasized and strengthened. Increasingly, the Jewish dimension of agency services is the common thread by which Jewish family service agencies define and structure their programs.

#### **Projects that Assist Divorced, Divorcing, and Stepfamilies**

Families experiencing separation and trauma can learn and gain support from others who have gone through the same experiences by participating in structured support groups, mentoring, and professional

casework services. Divorce mediation and other services can also help couples.

From his own experience, a federation lay leader in Baltimore had this to say:

When my 12-year marriage ended, I joined a support group for separated and divorced people at Jewish Family Services....Later my fiancée and I joined another JFS group targeted to step-parents. We weren't in any kind of crisis situation, but knew that some adjustment would be necessary for both of us and for my 9-year-old son. The group taught us that stepfamilies are not the same as nuclear families. We learned to form reasonable expectations and anticipate common issues. Jewish Family Services' motto is "We help you cope with life's changes." That's the kind of help that everyone can use at some point in their lives (Hallock, 1992).

#### **Services that Respond to the Needs of Disabled and Older Adult Members of Our Community**

Nothing troubles a devoted family member more than the knowledge that one day he or she will no longer be able to care for an aged or disabled loved one. Planning and caring for a relative in need are increasingly complex, involve the entire family, medical and legal personnel and agency professionals, and require information about available government and community supports. As decisions and options become more complex and as families require more support, communal institutions are being called on to take on responsibilities that were once primarily obligations of the family.

Currently, 17% of the core Jewish population is aged 65 and older, compared with 13% of the general population. According to the *Jewish Environmental Scan* (Hoenig, 1992), "Special populations among the Jewish elderly will have special needs. The elderly with special needs include Holocaust survivors, Soviet Jews, the poor, Alzheimer's victims, and those elderly with marginal incomes. Jewish elderly will continue

to use formal services more frequently than the rest of the population because of a greater perceived need.”

As the pre-eminent provider in most communities of home-based support services to the Jewish elderly and people with disabilities, Jewish family agencies meet these needs through family consultation, geriatric assessment, hands-on services, supported living programs, and the coordination of services. As families disperse geographically (i.e., the average Jewish family moves once in every 6 years, and one in three of these moves is to a new community), many concerned adult relatives have turned to the continental Elder Support Network and Jewish Information and Referral Service (under the auspices of the Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies) to provide information, referral, and case management on behalf of elderly or disabled persons living in another area.

#### **Services that Respond to Age-Old Concerns for the Poor, Needy, and Vulnerable in Our Community**

Crisis management and poor relief services—these are the reasons for which Jewish family agencies and communal fund raising were begun. In an era in which safety nets have been shredded, Jewish family agencies provide an anchor, a base, a home-away-from-home. As we have learned, Jewish charitable institutions for the widowed, orphaned, and sick helped define what it meant to be a Jewish community during the Middle Ages. Although the specific needs may have changed, our role and purpose in the 21st century remain as central as ever. Jewish family agencies serve as helping hands and a bridge to synagogues and other communal institutions.

In recent years, Jewish family agencies have experienced a substantial increase in the number of requests for financial assistance, as well as in the complexity of the problems people have when seeking financial help. At Jewish Family Service of Colorado, for example, 92% of all such re-

quests are made by families with children. Although frequently cash assistance is needed, these families require significant case management, advice, counseling, and guidance as well. The importance of serving the poor is also highlighted in the *Jewish Environmental Scan*, which states, “Poverty will be found particularly among the elderly, among divorced women with children, and among some structurally unemployed Jews...Federations need to dismiss myths that there are no poor Jews and face the possibility that poverty will increase” (Hoenig, 1992).

Working in collaboration with Jewish vocational agencies (or independently, where they do not exist), Jewish family service agencies have also developed many creative and successful programs to help the chronically unemployed achieve self-sufficiency, dignity, and independence. Most importantly, Jewish family agencies are an extension of the community's values and our collective investment in the future of the North American Jewish family.

#### **Services that Respond to the Special Needs of Our Children and to Adults Seeking a Child of Their Own**

We often say that Jewish children are our future, yet increasingly they are innocent victims of abuse, family dissolution, or emotional neglect. Family counseling and supportive parenting services can work to prevent further breakup and lifelong trauma. When more serious interventions are needed, there are Jewish foster care and residential treatment programs, but these services must be strengthened as a community priority to ensure that every Jewish child be given a Jewish home and a Jewish environment when they can no longer be provided by the extended family.

For infertile couples and single adults seeking a child of their own, adoption programs in many Jewish family agencies increasingly function as part of a national network for both domestic and international child placements. Nearly 3% of the chil-

dren in Jewish homes are adopted, about three times the national average. Moreover, the *Jewish Environmental Scan* found that "about 13% of married couples wanting to have children over the next 3 years are considering adoption" (Hoenig, 1992). Many of these couples will require even more assistance from our community in the future to achieve their dream of a family.

**Welcoming the Stranger: Services that Respond to the Diverse Needs of New Americans**

Despite the pressures that local communities have experienced during the recent exodus and resettlement of Soviet Jews, this immigration has been declared by the U.S. State Department to be one of the country's most successful. We have all been enriched by this influx of new Americans, many of whom are already "giving back" to their communities through local campaign contributions, volunteer efforts, synagogue and school involvement, and professional positions that benefit the community at large. Across North America, Jewish family agencies function as the lead resettlement organization, coordinating services with other agencies while providing the point of contact for involvement in Jewish life.

Yet, there exist several significant gaps in service to this population. Resettlement and acculturation involve more than merely finding housing and a job and learning English. They are often difficult processes, causing significant and long-term stresses for the families and exacerbating any pre-existing instabilities. For example, Jewish Family Service of Colorado has found that over 30% of the arriving families experience some form of mental health problem, chemical dependency, domestic violence, or child abuse and neglect. Notwithstanding the lack of available resources to address these issues in a comprehensive manner, many Jewish family agencies have developed innovative and effective programs to

address these problems, which have become national models for other refugee resettlement agencies.

**CONCLUSION**

The *Pirke Avot* (*Ethics of Our Fathers*) implores us to set a higher standard so that, "Other people's dignity (will be)...as precious to you as your own (*Pirke Avot* 2:15). If we do not fulfill our mission to strengthen Jewish individual and family life, all other Jewish teachings will ring hollow, and our Jewish communities will lose the foundation and unity on which they depend.

Given the demographic changes and the increased stresses experienced by many contemporary Jewish families, we must continue — but move beyond — our historic Jewish mission to care for the widow, the elderly, and the orphan to include all who are searching or in need in our communities. Jewish family service agencies play a central role in ensuring Jewish identity and continuity as a partner during periods of personal or family need, in outreach, support services, and informal Jewish education and in the development of innovative programs that strengthen the family as the basic unit in our communities for mutual support and the transmission of Jewish values and commitment to the next generation.

The future of our North American Jewish communities rests upon the strength of its families. In turn, their well-being, moral dignity, and degree of involvement in the Jewish community depend, in large part, on the strength of our Jewish family agencies.

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