

In My Opinion

THE EMPEROR'S CLOTHES REDUX

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In the mid-1960s, as a young Jewish Community Center (JCC) supervisor in St. Louis, I wrote a paper titled *The Emperor's Clothes* (excerpted at the end of this article). It was the first article I had written that attracted some wider attention. Teachers continue to assign that paper to their students, and I still occasionally get requests for reprints. The paper won an award from the Conference of Jewish Communal Service for the outstanding paper of the year. Indirectly, it also led to my next employment. Within a year, I was employed in New York at the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC).

A work about the context. During the 1950s and into the 1960s Conservative Jewry, or some of its leaders, were guilty of some degree of triumphalism, not unlike the triumphalism one hears today in some circles among the ultra-Orthodox. The Conservative movement seemed to be the branch of Judaism most in tune with the needs and desires of American Jewry in the post-World War II era as Jews began to move out of the inner cities and into near suburbs. Part of the triumphalism was a series of attacks by a few Conservative leaders on the JCC movement that denigrated any value it might have, particularly its aims to provide Jewish content and Jewish experiences to its members. *The Emperor's Clothes* first refuted some of these attacks, but the more significant part of the article

was its own assessment of the weaknesses of JCC programming and content in terms of its Jewishness. So successful were Conservative synagogues, many of which took on the name "Jewish Community Center," that in a number of places including New York itself, the JCCs had to maintain or revert to an older archaic name—YM-YWHA.

Therefore, it seems appropriate, a generation and a good portion of a career later, to look at the arguments made in *The Emperor's Clothes* and to examine which of them seem invalid in the light of greater experience, age and, it is hoped, maturity and which of them, if any, continue to be valid critiques of JCCs and the JCC movement. Consider these three changes:

1. JCCs have undergone a sea change in their attitudes to and recognition of the centrality of Jewish experience, Jewish content, and Jewish clientele. In the 1960s, many JCC workers were still debating the validity of the Janowsky report, and a number of them did not recognize the necessity or even importance of fighting to maintain a primarily Jewish clientele. In fact, the plenary session of the Conference of Jewish Communal Service at which I accepted the above award was scheduled on a late Saturday afternoon. I appeared unshaven and apologized for my appearance by noting that it was not out of any disrespect for the Conference but rather out of respect for the Sabbath.

In the mid-1990s that kind of scheduling would be unthinkable. Events sponsored by almost all Jewish organizations are held with the greatest respect for the Sabbath and Jewish holidays. Kashruth at Jewish functions is almost a *sine qua non* and the Jewish

Community Centers Association, even under its predecessor name, The Jewish Welfare Board, has formally accepted the notion that achieving Jewish purposes is the central goal of the JCC movement. That is true even beyond the value of formal statements by commissions on Jewish education in the JCCs. This change is not simply true for the JCC but for the entire field of Jewish communal service.

2. Equally true is the massive change that has taken place in the personnel of Jewish communal service itself. In the 1960s, a traditional or Orthodox Jewish communal service worker, accepted as he or she might be personally, was still something of an anomaly. Certainly, there were not many of us. Today, Jewish communal service in all its disciplines and branches is peppered with Jewish men and women who are personally observant and who have extensive Jewish education themselves. Most dramatic is the fact that traditional and Orthodox Jews are serving or have served in the past decade as the chief executive officers of many of the most important and prestigious organizations of Jewish life in North America.
3. Most important, the JCC has undergone a massive change in the quality of its Jewish educational program. It is not unheard of for a JCC to engage a high-level, full-time employee, a scholar-in-residence, exclusively to enrich the Jewish educational content of the program. And in many places, the adult Jewish education offered at the JCC is the richest in the community. This change has affected all age levels, and even preschool children receive a reasonable dose of Jewish educational content along with their other activities. All told, JCCs can hardly be accused of not taking seriously their charge to provide Jewish educational content for their clientele.

When we examine the above three points, we see that in the mid-1960s I was unable to appreciate fully the degree to which JCCs could grow, evolve, change, and develop. For those errors, I apologize. Unfortunately, the story does not end here. There remain at least two major areas in which the criticisms of the JCC movement made in the 1960s continue to be somewhat valid and may even be built into the nature of the JCC itself, unable ever to change.

First, the JCC continues to be dedicated to serving the entire Jewish community or as close to that as it can come. Yet, it is hard to see how the Jewish community today, which includes so many different denominations, subdenominations, propensities, and special proclivities, can be served without sacrificing the richness of the program. The commitment to breadth sometimes undercuts the depth of the program. If the JCC movement were to adopt a specific philosophy, there would be many programming possibilities. As I wrote in the 1960s, the belief that all Jews should make aliyah to Israel is a very specific and formidable belief. If that became the philosophy of the JCC, it could provide a very strong program for a limited number of people. Similarly, the belief that Jews should pray three times a day, put on tefillin and tallit and observe 613 commandments is also very significant and meaningful. And if a JCC adopted those beliefs, it could probably develop a very rich and meaningful program, unfortunately for only a small percentage of North American Jewry. However, none of this is likely to happen. The JCC continues to be the place that sees itself as the home for Jews of various persuasions and beliefs and various philosophies, a place where they can learn *about* Judaism without being pushed too hard for a narrow definition of what that means. In fact, some of our best thinkers and writers in the Jewish communal service field in recent years have written papers chastising us for not providing *enough* breadth nonetheless.

Why do we not, we are asked, do a better job of servicing singles, single parents, intermarrieds, people from Israel, homosexuals and lesbians, and so on. Even while our commitment to breadth militates against our being able to enrich the content of our program, we are being pushed to widen that breadth, to broaden it and to take more Jews into the tent. It may very well be that the unique North American JCC movement has as one of its fundamental characteristics that commitment to breadth, and it may never be able to overcome the contradiction between breadth and depth in program. As long as that is the case, then some of the criticisms made in *The Emperor's Clothes* continue to be valid, as valid today as they were in the mid-1960s.

My second point in many ways is simply restating the prior one. I believe that all our progress in Jewish education has been in educating *about* Judaism, rather than *advocating* specific Jewish behaviors. I fear that unless we can cross the bridge from teaching about to advocating, we may never be able to cross the bridge from "pareve" programming to particularly meaningful programming in the Jewish area. And yet, the very nature of our philosophy makes advocacy very difficult and very limited. We can generally say to people "do something Jewish," but it is very hard to specify of what that something ought to consist.

And so we have seen, over a quarter of a century of progress in JCCs very important and meaningful progress. The optimistic view would claim that in the next quarter of a century JCCs may be able to progress in the two very important areas mentioned above where progress has been slower and less substantial. It will be difficult, and yet experience teaches us that we should not believe anything is impossible. The JCCs have proven themselves more flexible, more resilient, more capable of maturity than one might have believed some decades ago.

It seems to me that there are at least three specific ways in which the JCCs might evolve to move Jewish continuity and

identity forward beyond what has already been accomplished, thereby strengthening the community.

1. Ties between Israel and the JCCs of North America have grown much stronger in recent decades, but the number of young people who go to Israel or who are sent to Israel by the JCCs each year is pitifully small, despite the fact that we know that extended visitation to Israel is one of the most effective ways to build stronger Jewish identity among North American Jews. It would not require an extraordinary amount of funds if the JCCs committed themselves in the coming decade to quadruple or quintuple the number of Jews selected each year to visit Israel for a year, for a semester, or at least for a summer. Such a development would be very good news for the Jewish people in a time of great concern.
2. One of the miracles that preceded the founding of the State of Israel was the revival of Hebrew as a living language for an entire people. I do believe that our lay leadership in North America has become sophisticated and generally educated enough so that we could develop a small but important cadre of leaders who learn more of the Hebrew language, and so become able to participate in meetings in Israel or in North America in Hebrew. The formation and development of such a leadership cadre would be very much in the interest of the Jewish people and would pay off in ways that we cannot even begin to predict today.
3. There is today a demographic quirk that provides JCCs with an opportunity. Beginning around the turn of the century there will be something of a boomlet in the number of Jewish adolescents in the North American community. This boomlet is an "echo" of the great Baby Boom of the 1950s after World War II. The children of that Baby Boom began

having their own children in the 1980s and in spite of growing intermarriage rates and low per capita birth rates, the number of Jewish children born has begun to increase. JCCs in a number of cities felt this phenomenon during the 1980s and, in many cases, greatly expanded their programs for early childhood education. As this cohort grows, and it is now beginning to reach the elementary school level, it will in 6 to 8 years reach adolescence and provide the Jewish community with the above-mentioned boomlet. There was a time when service to young Jewish women and men was the very heart of Center programming. It would be a great service to the entire Jewish community if that structure could be at least partially recreated. It would be good if Jewish teenagers sensed that the Center was the place to be on a Sunday afternoon or for at least a couple of hours in the evening each week. The more association by Jews with other Jews, we have learned from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, the more that correlates with in-marriage as opposed to inter-marriage. If we can multiply that degree of association and the number of Jews who are exposed to it, we will be helping the future of the Jewish community. It will not be easy. Servicing

adolescents is one of the most expensive aspects of JCC programming and the one for which there are fewest public resources. Nonetheless, I hope that the creativity and will can be mustered so that JCCs prepare for that change in our population structure in the coming decade and take advantage of it. Certainly, malls cannot be accepted as the only place in which large numbers of teenagers regularly congregate. This is important for another reason. Once this cohort, this boomlet, passes beyond adolescence, the likelihood is that the Jewish community will be facing a largely diminished number of potential affiliates and participants in their programs for 20 or 25 years or even more. That's simply one of the realities that face us in the future.

I close with the realization again of how far we have come. Even the criticisms I reiterate here are double-edged: in so many areas of life our strengths are also our weaknesses, and vice versa. The weaknesses of the JCCs—their breadth and ability to educate—are in many ways also their very strengths. Yet, there is still a way to go in Jewish community building and we will never get there completely until we reach that great day that we all await—that day when “the Lord will be One and His name One.”

THE EMPEROR'S CLOTHES

DONALD FELDSTEIN

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Not too many years ago the debates in the Jewish center field were about the validity of sectarianism in a democracy, the Jewish objectives of the centers, and such. Today we are proud of having passed the point of debating whether or not we have Jewish objectives, and are now at the point of "understanding this responsibility and learning effectively how to discharge it."¹

This changed emphasis from "what" to "how" is probably healthy in that the former was mixed with elements of self-hate, and abstract fixations which can interfere with real performance. However, this paper will contend that in our move beyond abstraction and philosophy we have swallowed glib generalities and some downright falsehoods about Jewish purpose and experience, which corrupt our practice.

We tell them [lay people] to look for Jewish content and then we get more and more foolish trying to develop content for them to see, rather than educating them around components of our work which are really meaningful. It hurts our own morale and all of us who have heard the small talk at conferences among workers and executives know that many of them have contempt for what their agencies are doing in the Jewish area but are afraid to say so publicly. We are trapped by what we have told people to demand of us. Like the Emperor's Clothes, our Jewish centrality is often non-existent and people are beginning to notice it.

As a matter of fact there is a basic contradiction between our expressed goals of serving the total Jewish community and the ability to develop a specific rich and meaningful Jewish educational program. The Jewish community has a variety of facets of expression with a variety of value orientations, a variety of practices and ceremonies, and a variety of beliefs, many of which are mutually exclusive. The center is devoted to serving all Jews or as close to that as it can come. To the extent that we are to serve all Jews the philosophy that we can espouse becomes watered down, general and universal. It is only to the extent that we are exclusive that our content richens. For example, the extent to which we have a meaningful program about the state of Israel excludes those Jews who identify with the American Council on Judaism's philosophy about Israel. That is why there continues to be a need and a validity for very specific youth groups under temple and other organizational auspices, that have a specific value orientation. There is also a lot of validity for what we are doing, but our ability to build rich contentful Jewish program is limited. Of course, we can help individual groups to develop rich program of their own by helping them think through what they want, but this again is good group work under any auspices rather than an expression of a specific Jewish philosophy.

However, center workers have ignored this limitation in a desperate attempt to convince themselves and others that what we do is more meaningful than it is, that there is much specific Jewish content and there are values we can apply in our work.

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¹Sanford Solender, *Jewish Values and Jewish Community Center Programming*, National Jewish Welfare Board, New York, 1959.

Up to now, as Judah Shapiro has pointed out our mistake may have been in trying to find the Jewish content in the JCC, when in fact the JCC is an expression of Jewish content. Jewish tradition has always been to provide a network of social services to its communities and the JCC is one of those services. If the concepts of Jewish social service, hospitals and casework agencies, come under question, we may also be legitimately questioned, but when we dilute our social service component in favor of a glib and unfulfilled philosophy, then we are certainly open to question. Actually I suspect that centers would be among the last institutions whose right to live could be questioned because even though what we may be doing may be just good group work and only specifically Jewish in a limited way, our concern for Jewish attitudes and our interests in them will make our services hard to duplicate in the foreseeable future. There is also a lack of any comparable network of group service agencies outside of the JCCs. What we need to justify is our high cost of service as compared to YMCAs and other group service institutions and this can only be done by using social workers to do social work.

1. The Jewish community center continues to be a vehicle for identification with the Jewish community for a significant minority of people who do not identify through any other institution.
2. The Jewish community center remains as one institution in the community with the word Jewish written all across it, that for our young people can be seen as a source of pleasure and gratification, an authority-supported fun house, if you will. This is no small thing, especially since Jewish education has not yet succeeded with great masses of young people in leaving a positive identification with Jewish institutional life. Judaism to many is still defined only in terms of negatives and prohibitions.
3. The Jewish community center can be a unifying force in an otherwise split-up Jewish community for joint projects, for cultural exchanges, for joint consideration of problems in the community, for being the catalyst in bringing together various rabbinical groups on "neutral" ground. Many of our Jews also have a separatism problem within Judaism.
4. In specific areas where it does not duplicate services being offered elsewhere the Jewish community center may take the initiative in offering a very rich program of informal education and Jewish cultural programming.
5. "When the half gods go, the gods appear." It may even be that when we eliminate the platitudes we may be able to come up with certain meaningful values and ideas which are universal enough to be offered to all Jews and specific enough to be operational, unlike "social justice," or "survival," which are so universal as to be meaningless. If we come up with these, we can try actively to transmit them.

These are not unimportant contributions and we need not apologize for them, but we do need to be humble about them. They are not the answer to the problems of Jewish living, nor would they alone justify the existence of the JCC. They are simply some things a JCC can do.