

# TRANSMITTING AND ENHANCING JEWISH KNOWLEDGE, EXPERIENCE, AND UNITY THROUGH PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE WITH THE AGED

TOVAH LICHTENSTEIN

*Bar-Ilan School of Social Work, Ramat Gan, Israel*

*When working with the aged, the goal of Jewish communal service should be the transmission of Jewish knowledge and experience as ends in themselves, rather than as a means of ensuring Jewish continuity. The aged should be helped to gain Jewish knowledge so they can assume their traditional role as repositories of wisdom. The process of life review, which is a task of old age, can be used as a motivating force in the pursuit of Jewish knowledge.*

An examination of the role of the professional communal service agency in the transmission of Jewish knowledge and values to a client group is a complex task. Such an examination must relate concurrently to several systems. The first system is the client system; in this case, the aged. The term "aged" is no more than a catchword for a population group over 65 whose diversity is greater than its similarity. Their knowledge base, attitude toward their Jewishness, and commitment and devotion to Jewish unity and Jewish practice reflect the range that is present in the Jewish community at large.

The second system is that of Jewish knowledge, experience, and unity. How one interprets, understands, and orders these concepts is a function of one's ideological orientation and religious commitment. The emphasis, focus, and content of Jewish knowledge, experience, and unity would be different in the differing sectors of the Jewish community.

The third system is the professional system with its own complex of values, goals, and aspirations. The agency, with its board, policy, staff, and population it serves, re-

flects and relates to local needs and issues while at the same time it is part of a larger organizational structure that relates to the needs of the larger Jewish community.

This article examines these different systems in an attempt to delineate the professional practice component in the transmission of Jewish values, knowledge, and unity to the aged.

## THE AGED

Traditionally, the aged were considered the repositories of knowledge and wisdom: "Wisdom is with aged men and understanding in length of days" (Job 12.12). The role of the aged was to serve not only as repositories of wisdom but also as community leaders who were divinely ordained to take an active role in exercising leadership. As part of this exercise of authority in an official community structure, the elderly also were responsible for the transmission of knowledge and tradition, both communally and individually. Moses exhorts the people of Israel to "Remember the days of old, Consider the years of many generations; Ask thy father, and he will declare unto thee, Thine elders, and they will tell thee" (Deuteronomy 32.7).

However, this idealized view of old age was tempered by reality. Only the learned

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aged were to be the bearers and transmitters of Jewish knowledge and values. The view of the unlearned aged was not particularly complimentary. The adage, "There is no fool like an old fool," has its Talmudic variation:

Rabbi Ismael the son of Rabbi Yossi says, As Torah scholars age, their wisdom increases as it written in the Scriptures: "Wisdom is with aged men and understanding in length of days." As the ignorant age their foolishness increases, as it is written in the Scriptures: "He removeth the speech of men of trust and taketh away the sense of elders" (Tractate Shabbat, 152a).

This dual view of the aged did not, however, negate the respect that traditionally was accorded them. This respect was not linked to knowledge or authority, but was an attempt to counteract and modify the natural tendency of the young to denigrate and show disrespect to this population. The deference that was due to the elderly was a function of age, not of intellectual accomplishments. It is written in the Talmud: "Isi the son of Judah says, 'And thou shall rise before the aged' applies to all aged" (Tractate Kiddushin, 33a).

Erik Erikson has described the last stage of life as the age of integrity. That includes both an emotional integration faithful to the image-bearers of the past and a sense of comradeship with men and women of distant times and of different pursuits who have created orders and objects and sayings conveying human dignity and love" (Erikson, 1968, p. 139). For Erikson, the successful resolution of the crisis of old age is found in the ability of the individual to realize that "I am what survives of me" and to realize that the "what" is made up not only of individual history but also of the history of those who preceded him. For the Jewish aged that "what" includes the history, tradition, and commitments of the Jewish people, of the specific ethnic group within the Jewish people, and of the general community to which the individual belongs.

Today, Jewish communal services have taken upon themselves the roles that were traditionally reserved for the elders. The aged in many of our communities are no longer the repositories of Jewish knowledge nor have Jewish experiences been central to their lives. The aged of today were young at a time when it was fashionable, at least in the United States, to identify with the general American culture, and Jewish identification was not a high priority item for them. Their Americanization and integration into the general society occurred at the expense of their Jewishness. Therefore, the aged of today, instead of being the transmitters of tradition, need instead to be the receivers of it. Such a situation by definition is regressive for the community if not for the individual and does not build on the strengths of the elderly as a group who should be the link with the past and serve as role models for the young.

Yet, the aged are a very heterogeneous group and engage in a variety of life reviews. There is a population of aged who are knowledgeable about the history of their particular ethnic group, but are ignorant of Jewish tradition; there are also aged who are steeped in Jewish knowledge, yet are not knowledgeable about the history or sociological structure of the communities in which they live. If communal service agencies can join with the aged in a partnership of mutual enrichment, then the traditional role of the aged as the transmitters of the past will be enhanced. At the same time the aged can be helped to gain areas of Jewish knowledge that they are lacking so they can begin to relate to their Jewish past. In working with the elderly who are alienated from Jewish knowledge and tradition, the emphasis of the agencies should be on these two areas while simultaneously attempting to have the aged themselves teach or discuss those areas in which they do have expertise. In other words, the aged should transmit to others knowledge about those areas of community relationships and history that are an integral part of their past while the

agencies engage them in an examination of Jewish knowledge and tradition that they are lacking. The aged who are more steeped in Jewish knowledge should be used as a resource with the young, who should in turn engage them in a consideration of current community issues. Thus, both the life review and the transmission of knowledge and experience need not be regressive, but can be the basis for a mutually enriching experience. The aged can "Remember the days of many generations" themselves while they at the same time relate to the younger generation. The communal agency can be an enabling force in this process.

Although those groups who identify themselves as belonging to the Jewish community have the desire and ability to delineate both the knowledge and experience that they would like to receive, the task of delineating this area with an uncommitted population is both arduous and complex. Yet, this task might be less difficult with a population of the aged. The very process of life review can be used as a motivating force in the pursuit of Jewish knowledge. Jewish knowledge can become a way to connect with the past and of exploring its traditions. Jewish experience can also be a direct link with the next generation above or with those that preceded them. Whether the link is intellectual or experiential will be a function of individual preference and inclination.

#### JEWISH KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE

The parameters and the content of Jewish knowledge and experience that are to be transmitted are a function of ideological and religious commitment. The need for a differential diagnosis of the population served and a delineation of the required Jewish knowledge and experience is crucial. Professional casework literature has been concerned with enhancing the goal-achieving skills of its clientele and has placed great emphasis on the joint task of the

professional and the client in mutually defining and setting realistic goals for the client population. Hidden agendas have proven to be counterproductive in achieving these aims. Goals that are overly ambitious, too general or vague, or set in advance by the practitioners without consulting the clients are all doomed to failure (Reid, 1970; Wood, 1978). The same caveats would seem appropriate in the field of Jewish communal service where the goal is Jewish continuity. Because professionals' stake in this goal is so great, the temptation to set goals for client groups is strong.

The basic goal of agencies, as well as rationale for the policy of transmitting Jewish knowledge, is Jewish continuity (Bubis, 1980; Reisman, 1983). This goal, however, is an inappropriate one for the aged. I would suggest that the goal for work with the aged, as it should be for all other age groups, is the transmission of Jewish knowledge and experience as a goal in and of itself, rather than as a means of ensuring Jewish continuity. The notion of "Torah for its own sake" is central to the Jewish experience. If we are Jews then we have to know and to have experienced what Jewishness is all about. When we have done so, then Jewish survival and continuity will be an important by-product of such an endeavor. Continuity is the opposite side of the coin of knowledge, experience, and commitment and is a goal that cannot be pursued in isolation.

#### JEWISH UNITY

Jewish unity is a complex issue with ramifications both for the individual and the communal spheres. By unity do we mean that we all agree on the least common Jewish denominator? Does unity mean that all sides compromise? Or does it mean that, despite the real differences among the various sectors of the Jewish community, we can all work together toward common goals? My definition of unity is the last one, as such a position allows for pluralism and real difference in Jewish life and organ-

ization while at the same time preserves the ultimate commonality of all Jews. Such a position is congruent with the life tasks and summing up in which the aged engage.

Erikson has written rather poignantly of the ultimate task of old age: "A meaningful old age, then, preceding a possible terminal senility, serves the need for that integrated heritage which gives indispensable perspective to the life cycle" (Erikson, 1968, p. 140). The elderly, according to Erikson, have wisdom. Erikson explains:

Not that each man can evolve wisdom for himself. For most, a living *tradition* provides the essence of it. But the end of the cycle also evokes "ultimate concerns" for what chance man may have to transcend the limitations of his identity and his often tragic or bitterly tragicomic engagement in his one and only life cycle within the sequence of generations (Erikson, 1968, p. 140).

The wisdom that Erikson describes and "the ultimate concerns" of the aged make them particularly attuned and sensitive to the need for Jewish unity. The need to be related to the commonality of all Jews in order to preserve both "the sequence of generations" and to ensure the continuity of the Jewish people allows the quest for unity to be a priority appropriate to the life cycle tasks in which the aged engage.

#### THE PROFESSIONAL SYSTEM

The attitudes of professional agencies toward the above-mentioned issues will be influenced by their goals. In an interesting exchange on the topic of Jewish identity and agency function that was published in the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* in 1983, Reisman argued that the rationale of all Jewish agencies is to strengthen the Jewish community by imparting Jewish knowledge and by enhancing the well-being of Jews. Miller, agreeing with the need to strengthen Jewish commitment, was skeptical of the ability of the existing professional and organizational framework

of communal agencies to impart Jewish content. He called for a redefinition of the role of the Jewish communal professional. This redefinition would be based on a clearly stated ideology that would be "a combination of education, casework, group dynamics and therapy, extensive Jewish knowledge and deep ethnic commitment, and how to combine all of these into an integrated workable approach to people" (Miller, 1983, p. 32).

Agencies that endeavor to enhance not only Jewish unity but also Jewish knowledge and experience need to restructure and clarify their own values, knowledge, and practice, as Miller has proposed. One of the reasons that agencies have not hastened to do so and have preferred to expend effort on the consideration of professional techniques rather than on a substantive discussion of the content and nature of Jewish knowledge and experience that they wish to transmit is that their major commitment is to Jewish continuity, rather than to the transmission of knowledge and experience per se. As a result, the latter task is seen only as a means to an end and has therefore not led to a re-evaluation of the professional content and function as Miller has suggested. In such a situation Jewish knowledge becomes no more than a technique or a program like all other programs and is important only as long as the agency sees it as a means to achieving its goal.

Yet, Jewish knowledge and practice are important goals in their own right. Unless communal services both individually and collectively re-evaluate their relationship to these elements, there will be what Steven Rod has identified as a "dissonance between our attitudes toward Jewish community center service delivery and our behavior in our daily work" (Rod, 1983, p. 254). The unspoken message of communal service agencies is that Jewish knowledge and experience are a client and not an agency need. If the communal services back away from their own Jewishness, how can they honestly transmit these elements to any

population group? How can we speak with conviction about transmitting Jewish knowledge and experience to any population when agencies are so ambivalent about the topic? How can we speak of Jewish unity when the values that are so important and integral to a portion of the Jewish people are not truly respected? These are the major questions that agencies, both individually and collectively, need to ask themselves if they wish to succeed at the task they have set for themselves of preserving and ensuring Jewish continuity. If the goal of Jewish survival can be achieved by transmitting Jewish knowledge, experience, and unity to client systems, can the agencies do any less for themselves? Client populations are sensitive to double messages. If communal agencies are to be the transmitters of Jewishness to the aged they must, as the aged of old, be its repositories as well.

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