

REFLECTIONS ON THE FIELD OF JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTERS

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Serving in a major leadership role in a Jewish communal association such as the Association of Jewish Center Workers (AJCW) places one in the position to view the field from a different perspective. While the focus may be narrower to the specific field, it does penetrate much deeper than normal. It is from such a perspective that I view the needs and limitations of Jewish Center work, a field of practice that has a long and proud history of service, innovation and creativity.

As the Association and the Jewish Center field look ahead to the next decade, there are issues which we must address. There are matters of concern that our profession should address. These are matters of evolution. Ours is a dynamic institution always changing; sometimes whether we want it to, or not.

I shall try to identify several key issues. Obviously, these are not all the concerns facing our field, but they are several of the most important:

- Integration
- Professional learning
- Re-careering
- Leadership

Each represents an area of our field's practice that requires strengthening, fresh thinking, creative applications of program and management skills, and the strongest comprehensive approaches our field can develop. Not all are problems, but if we do not give them our attention, the field will face a problematic future.

INTEGRATION OF THE FIELD

In the last decade, Center work has moved from a field almost exclusively staffed by social workers, with some educators, to a field which is primarily staffed by everything *but* social workers. There is no need to point out that today the field has drawn heavily on varieties of other training and educational backgrounds.

Our staffs are made up of early childhood educators, physical educators, recreators, educators, Jewish educators, individuals with degrees in Jewish communal service, and now, new technical specialties: fiscal administration computers, business management, and membership. Moreover, we don't know what the next emerging technical area will be. There are cultural arts, theatre, music, public relations, writers—a plethora of very competent and strongly skilled people who have come into our field.

We have not yet accepted these new technical skills. We have not planned for

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them, and we have not provided the kind of training that augments their technical skills, acclimating these people to Jewish Center work. In effect, we have not made them a part of the Center worker's team. They learn and work in small isolated cells within our practice without being accepted into the total mainstream of our field, without the status and recognition they deserve.

More important, we have not yet developed standards of practice. We never did it for social group workers, and now we have not done it for these new skills. We have never been able to determine what a good group worker is, and even more, what a good theatre person is, or what makes a good business manager?

Standards are a major factor in evaluating a field or profession. *Not* having the deficit in the agency or department can *not* be the only measure of staff performance.

Supervisors and administrators have been satisfied to permit people to stay within the narrow confines of their own specialty, not encouraging people to be part of the Center field. This means an early childhood educator attends a local or regional conference on early childhood education, but will not attend an AJCW regional or national conference to learn about early childhood education in the special setting of the Jewish communal field.

While we intellectually accept the differences in practice skills, we do not help our staffs learn the difference. This is happening in the technical areas and in children, youth, health, and physical education services. If we are going to be successful as a profession, continuing to serve the needs of the Jewish community, then we are going to have to provide more integration and more training.

We need to look at a field of work and say, "This is the common setting in which we work. In addition to being an expert in child development or fitness, we also have to be expert in Jewish community

center work, meeting and serving the needs of the Jewish community." We need to take some risks in these areas. We have not yet begun to do this. What we have in common should be more than where we work. When I say "we," I mean all of us: Centers themselves, AJCW, and JWB. JWB has not moved in this area. Nor has AJCW but it is focusing on the integration of profession and the agencies. Improving kindred groups (sections) would help.

We are going to have to define, analyze, and come up with creative, practical solutions, or the effectiveness of our work will be badly diluted.

ON-GOING LEARNING

A second concern is in the area of learning. I mean "keeping-up." Knowing what the latest techniques are and then sharing those techniques. I have been appalled by the lack of adaptivity in our field to the technical developments evolving in the last decade.

In 1984, I presented a workshop on computers for Center staff at a New York-New Jersey meeting. It was a basic familiarization seminar. At that time only seven out of fifty people had taken any courses in computers.

As I move around the country, I find the number of computer-informed Center workers is increasing slightly. As a field, we have been resistant to change to new things, in new ways of doing our jobs. We have been analytical in the way we have approached people practice, but have not kept up in those areas that could help free time from paper work, allowing more "people time." It is not just with computers. It is in the new research and new writings, in supervision, Jewish education, management and program content.

We have moved into day care, but, in too many cases, reluctantly. Too much of our program is old hat and lacking that flair and imagination we have demonstrated over the years as creative program-

mers. I understand this may be too strong a statement for some, and some may disagree. The proof, however, is in the doing. We are judged by what we produce.

In many meetings of Center workers I attend, I am always asking participants whether they have taken formal continuing education courses or college, university, or community college courses in the last five years. The number of people who have taken any type of updated course is pitifully small. We somehow consider a two-hour session on supervision given by the Federation of our Centers as keeping up. It just is not adequate. This lack of ongoing training is reflected not only in what we do on the job, but what we have not done in transmitting our knowledge and skills to others. There is almost no writing taking place in the Center field.

I cannot recall any Center work-practice articles published in the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* since Dave Dubin wrote a thoughtful article a couple of years ago, and Bernie Rosen presented the first Tasgal Paper. AJCW cannot publish an issue of "Viewpoints" because no one is willing to write. In the last few years, AJCW has published one issue of "Viewpoints" about personnel standards. Even though money has been budgeted to publish two or three issues a year, the editors have been totally without support from the field.

In the final analysis, the proof is in the doing—and we have not been doing. If we do not turn this around, we cannot talk about a "profession." There is good practice happening, but we need to write it; we need to video-tape it; we need others to share it. Real practice is only effective if it is useable by others working in our field.

What happens in Boston, King's Bay, or San Diego that is good, strong, practical, and generic should be practiced in Portland, Los Angeles, or Miami because a worker wrote it up and shared it. Solid practice is based on good educational practice, good learning, good manage-

ment. Good human practice must be transmitted to each of us. We cannot count on someone else. You have heard the caveat, "publish or perish." It applies not only to academia and not just to any individual, but to our entire field of work.

RE-CAREERING

We need to "re-career" our field. Our work is made up of many who are career people, plus many people we know as locals. Generally, a local person is a non-mobile staff member who has been recruited out of the local community and who may, or may not, have technical training, knowledge or skill to do the job.

Locals are hired, in part, because they are bright enthusiastic people. They are cheaper, do not have moving expenses, and the Center is prepared to invest a year or more in their development. To be clear: I favor their engagement. This is a natural movement for the field, but it means we must recognize this movement and deal with it. Some of our training programs need to be refocused on people who have no long-term career interest in the Center field and who may stay on the job briefly or to others who will stay at the same position for a long time. We also need to focus specialized training on those of us who see the Center field as a long-term career and to differentiate the training and the experience we offer, in the orientation and the commitment career people make.

I believe that while we have much work to do with local staff members who have come on our team, we also have an important obligation to encourage career workers and to provide adequate experiences, job satisfaction and salaries which will provide our field with a reservoir of future top leadership.

The worst thing that can happen to the Center field in the next decade is to become staffed primarily by local people who do not intend to spend their lifetime energy and career working in Jewish com-

munal service. We will get more provincial. The interchange between Centers will slow down. Our creative interaction will diminish. We may still have a Center field, but it will be staffed more and more by people who have come from the boards, rather than Center-trained professionally trained people. We already have a number of instances of this happening. Without any denigration of the individuals involved, this imbalance does not bode well for our field.

LEADERSHIP

The last area of concern is one that is difficult to quantify—in fact, it is difficult to identify clearly. I *feel* it, rather than being able to *research* it and give facts.

We have a shortage of leadership. It is evident in AJCW in Chapters, committees, and at the national level. I do not wish to be misunderstood. I think the people who are sitting as presidents of Chapters, chairmen of committees, and national officers are strongly committed people and committee leaders. Maybe I am too attached to the past when we had an abundance of leadership people ready to do battle on the issues of the day, whether they were professional issues or social issues.

Maybe what my instinct tells me is that fewer Center workers get excited anymore. Fewer people seem to be willing to get their hackles up on issues that can make our field, our Centers and our Association stronger. As workers, we have turned to everybody else but ourselves to provide salary and benefits. We have grumbled about AJCW, we have complained about JWB, we have *kvetched* about the unions and about the Centers, but we left ourselves out of the formula. "Somebody else" can make our field better.

We need to undertake a leadership development program for pros just like JWB is doing nationally for laymen. Maybe our field has changed so that the levels of commitment to any field or any

institutional organization have simply weakened. I think there are still many young, and not so young, workers who have given themselves to developing leadership in the field. I mean by leadership, the willingness to take the time and effort to write, to plan conferences, to aggressively make their voices heard—to get excited and to care.

The leadership issue needs to be addressed by AJCW at the national and chapter levels, and JWB needs to spotlight this shortcoming. JWB has been very concerned and effective with lay leadership development, but maybe not strongly enough concerned with the development of strong professional leadership. I implore us to look forward to the changing field and how leaderships will evolve, and from where these leaders are coming.

TO THE FUTURE

So, in essence we have many technical and educational cells functioning within our field that we never had before. We are going to have to learn how to integrate them, accept them, train them, and bring these people into a whole, rather than their remaining multiple small satellites. We are going to have to learn ways of keeping up and keeping ahead in the social sciences, education, business, and the electronic technologies. We have got to give attention to the non-career people and their training, but even more attention and more dollars to preserve the career-oriented workers in our field. Lastly, we have to give some attention to an area that has been the exclusive focus of laymen—the development of volunteer leadership.

All of us in Jewish Center work will have to take a deeper look at our field, recognize and accommodate those changes that happened and are continuing to occur. We need to look at our component parts and develop quick, effective, flexible plans for dealing with these changes which swirl about us, and will continue whether

we are prepared for them, or not. When we do deal with these issues, we can become more attractive, more effective

tool for the North American Jewish community.



TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO IN THIS JOURNAL

Variations and differences among Jewish centers about the primary emphasis, the nature of their Jewish purposes and the nature and extent of their commitment to social work, if not inevitable, may as we have said be quite desirable. They are certainly not undesirable. The quest for clarity, the golden land of unity of purpose, the insistence upon resolution of ideological problems contain serious risks even if they were possible to achieve. Jews have most at stake in the maintenance of a free, open secular society. We should not strive for situations and conditions within our own group which would be antithetical to our survival if characteristic of the larger society. Resolutions of conflicts and differences may mean betrayal of more important values. Unity and clarity may become a cloak for authoritarianism and conformity. It may well inhibit, if we may say so, a traditional and characteristic Jewish creativity and innovation. Professional leadership of the Jewish community center does not require that we have certainty in all things or many things. It does require that we act with certitude while we go about the necessary and never-ending task of trying to understand and know more about what we are trying to do in the first place.

Mitchell I. Ginsberg & Irving Miller
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