

The Jewish Family Life Institute: Implementing Priorities in the Jewish Community Center

GERALD FRIEDMAN

Director of Adult and Family Program Services, YM-YWHA of
Metropolitan New Jersey, West Orange, New Jersey

Introduction

IN the Haftorah read in the synagogue on the Sabbath preceding Passover — The Shabbat Hagadol — there are references to a peaceful and productive age when: "The hearts of parents will be turned toward their children and the hearts of children to their parents." The rabbis connected this vision with the meaning of Passover. Man is liberated and has dignity when the linkages between parents and children are strong. The Jewish community today is looking for answers to the questions posed by ever-increasing divorce rates, intermarriage, alienation, and other symptoms of the waning strength of Jewish family life. This paper will summarize one agency's efforts over a two-year period to develop a point of view about, and a plan of action for, serving Jewish families. It will briefly describe program vehicles which have been designed to implement the plan, and hint at directions we may take in the future.

Agency Self Study and Commitment: the Process Unfolds

In 1972, the YM-YWHA of Metropolitan New Jersey completed a two-year self study which reviewed the agency's programs and operations in reference to the communal, financial and social realities we were perceiving. The goal of the study was to establish priorities which would influence continuing emphasis in budget, staffing, and program for the 1970s. The completed findings — in booklet form —

were presented to the Board and to the staff in the summer of 1972. Priorities number one and two as listed on page 101 of the Conclusions, read as follows:

1. *Preservation of Jewish Community Life in America*

There was unanimity in assigning highest priority to Jewish cultural survival. Preservation of the continuity of Jewish life in our time becomes increasingly urgent in the face of numerous social and historical factors threatening dissolution. The Y is seen as a major vehicle for countering adverse trends, and program must be structured with this vital goal as a prime consideration. . . .

2. *Maintenance of the Integrity of the Nuclear Family*

The study emphasized recognition of the nature and severity of crisis in the family. Factors relating to changes in conventional roles, evolving attitudes toward authority, social mores and means of communication — all were encountered in various aspects of Y structure or program. While efforts at bolstering integrity of the family must persist, there exists the parallel responsibility for sensitive recognition of splintered family units and their special needs.

There was no lay or staff structure that was accustomed to grapple with such a tall order. Historically, there had been minimal cooperation or communication between staff of departments or between departmental Board committees other than for traditional agency-wide programs such as Purim Carnival or Chanukah party. Clearly, new formats were going to be needed if the agency was to translate the meaning of the self study into viable program.

Initial Response

The plan that was presented by the executive staff called for two major units of work: 1) An all-day staff institute in September of 1972 and 2) a Board-Staff retreat for December of 1972.

Neither of these efforts succeeded. At the all-day staff institute in September, most of the staff felt the contents too global, too unwieldy, too impenetrable. Many new staff, even the old-timers, were so caught up in learning what other departments were doing that they barely had time to focus on the real issue: how the *total* agency should interpret the priorities. The Staff-Board retreat fell through due to conflicts in dates and commitments.

For a while, we couldn't uncover any approach to help us respond to the self study. The issues, however, remained and were sharpened by a series of what were then unconnected programs, contacts with clients, and informal staff discussions.

In October and November of 1972, the Adult Department sponsored two Town Hall Meetings on *The Single Adult Experience* which were attended by nearly 200 people. At the workshops following the panel presentations and in the house parties which took place over the next two months, a distinct picture seemed to emerge that had tremendous impact on adult program formulation. Single adults seemed to be asking the Y and other communal agencies to play more direct and helping roles in their lives. They wanted help in assuming parental roles with greater confidence, and in maintaining positive Jewish attitudes and meaningful life styles.

At staff meetings, individual staff members were sharing information about the increasing number of single parents we were seeing in the Y. The

junior high worker had formed a group for children of divorced and separated parents. The pre-school director advised staff that her parent-discussion program had expanded and that parents were more eager to get these things started. Many staff felt there was uncertainty and confusion about marriage itself, a notion that marriage was problematic and that many people *expected* lack of success and pleasure in it. Some felt that the quality of friendship in the suburbs was strained and that it was difficult to make and keep friends.

A group of department heads and administrators became quite certain that some experimental programs would have to be tried. In the spring of 1973, two major program directions were established. One, under the leadership of the Executive Director, was called *J-E-W*, standing for *Jewish Experiential Weekend*. It was an experimental program focusing on Jewish living to be held at sleep-a-way camp during the summer of 1973 at which we would attempt to work with five or ten families over Shabbat.

The other direction emerged from a proposal written by the director of Youth Services, who was then supervising the Adult Department, for a series of family programs, spearheaded by *The Third Meal*. This was a Family Shabbat experience which was to be held in the Fall of 1973 for six alternate Saturday afternoons. A parent education unit for parents of junior highers and teenagers, and informal family recreation experiences including Family Chess Club, Family Table Tennis, and lounges were also listed in a mailing to the community. The proposal also called for a *New Member Open House* which was to be run once a semester, with the aim of involving new members, and drawing them closer to the Y.

Adults responded. All programs were well attended. Adults had discovered the Y and the Y discovered adults. Over 40 families were served in the initial programs and they hooked us into their friends and neighbors who began meeting with the supervisor of Adult Services to share ideas for additional programs. In the various meetings, some held at the Y and some in members' homes, we tuned in to the rhythm of adult life as it affects the majority of Jews in our suburban community. We became more programmatically conscious of critical points in the life of the family, such as the Bar Mitzvah, or time of synagogue choice when the children reach the age of 7 or 8, or the difficulties in "making it" in a new community if you've just arrived here, or the continued need for meeting with and developing closeness to other people in the community. Programs run by the Grade School including a family trip to the Lower East Side of New York, our agency-wide Chanukah program and the informal Jewish holiday workshops for families confirmed the message that people do want us to program around Jewish concerns.

Staff Committee

In October of 1973, a staff committee on Family Program was instituted by the assistant director, chaired by the director of Youth Services. In November of 1973, a full-fledged program proposal was presented to this committee by the chairman. Looking back on the proposal, which was written in the form of a brochure, it is satisfying to see how strongly and affirmatively "Jewish" it was, even to the inclusion of many Hebrew words and phrases. It was liberally sprinkled with quotations and sayings from the great rabbis and Jewish teachers, and probably "turned on" many of the staff who

read it. The Y's director of Public Relations confided that it was an "educational experience." This strengthened the committee's conviction that Jewish thought and values, presented in timely and attractive formats, are welcomed and embraced.

In preparing the brochure-proposal the author attempted to appeal to an experienced group of professional social group workers and administrators who, he felt, would respond positively to program that welded a Jewish orientation to a mental health perspective. He distributed to individual staff copies of articles in *New York Magazine* and other popular magazines as well as pieces from professional journals which described the developmental tasks of adults and families and the attendant malaises when personal and societal realities frustrate their successful resolution. In informal discussions, we re-discovered Eriksonian principles and "filled in" missing pieces in his writings by referring to the work of his students, most prominently Carl Levinson at Yale. It became easier to focus on the developmental needs and tasks of Jewish families and to give true value, not just lip service, to Jewish content programs which helped families make decisions, communicate more effectively, and work together on developing a satisfying Jewish life style. This proposal was built on the following foundations which were accepted as valid by the staff:

1. That adults *want* Jewish values and commitment to Judaism reinforced in their lives.
2. That parents *want* to transmit something of worth to their children and want to work *with* their children toward a more personal expression of Jewishness.
3. That families *welcome* exposure to different styles of Jewish living,

to exciting Jewish personalities, to hints and clues as to how they might live Jewishly.

4. That families *want* to relate to other families, to have close and intimate friendships, and to experience a sense of "belonging" to community.

The proposal beamed with this positive approach. As a matter of fact, all ensuing publicity and recruitment in the community reflected this "attitude."

Carving Out Reality

In an action-filled two-week period, executive staff reviewed the practical implications of the proposal with the aim of making it operational as soon as possible. While there was enthusiasm for almost all of the programs proposed there were no adequate funds to take on a new full-time staff member and other appropriate supports for the new service. Accordingly, the program was seen as functioning as a unit of the Department of Adult Services, instead of as a separate department. No separate budget or new staff would be brought into the picture. However, a special brochure, in addition to the regular Spring semester brochure, would be mailed to the community. A separate Board committee to oversee the development of the unit, which would be called "*Jewish Family Life Institute 1974*," would be created.

The former director of Youth Services and supervisor of the Adult Department was assigned to be the full time director of Adult and Family Program Services and his position in Youth Services was assumed by the director of Grade School Services, who continued to function in his old position as well.

With the help of the assistant executive director, the new department head met with clusters of lay people to delimit the program and establish

priorities. One of the first tasks was dropping many programs in the Adult Department, including bridge, party fare and other traditional recreational and adult education offerings. We felt that many of these courses were given elsewhere and would not be "missed."

Other proposed programs were limited to one-shot or 2-session workshop experiences to make them more palatable as experimental offerings, especially for targeted groups such as single-parent families. Others were dropped temporarily because of the unavailability of appropriate staff. (This turned out to be a major problem throughout the first semester. Many of the programs were offered on Sundays, when Jewishly knowledgeable specialists were not available. The director of the department wound up leading many workshops and groups.)

Programs for certain age groups were put off so that we could focus on the young married population with children ranging from grade school to early teens. We wanted families who were not being served by other Jewish institutions and those who were talking to us about the need for participating more fully in Jewish life. In December of 1973, the proposal summary was brought before the Board and received unanimous approval. There were some reservations about our venturing forth so aggressively and independently without, for example, meeting at length with our sister agencies such as the Jewish family service agency, the Federation, the synagogues, the schools, etc. These concerns were fielded by the executive director and he promised that appropriate announcements would be mailed to all institutions apprising them of our service. They would be most agreeable to giving their cooperation as they had in the past. So much for institutional process.

Favorable reactions from a young

and dynamic board member resulted in that person being immediately named chairman of the Family Program Services Committee. After she read the prospective brochure and constructively criticized and changed it, it was given to the printer. In January of 1974, the Jewish Family Life Institute brochure was mailed to the community.

Community Response

Over 100 different families have participated in programs of the Jewish Family Life Institute, which is now seven months old. Many more are talking about joining up in the fall. Jewish professionals from all over the country — including rabbis, educators, social workers, — have been intrigued and delighted with the contents. Our Board committee on Family Program Services views itself as the most productive and dynamic of all agency committees and members attend various functions of the department, speak and listen to the community, and recommend new program ideas. People see our Y as a formidable Jewish institution. Staff are consulted with and seen as resources and experts. When we attend conferences, we are descended upon by those with eager questions and curiosity. Feelings of pride and accomplishment are always bubbling to the surface. We feel we are on the right track.

The programs listed below are highlights of the Institute and suggest the reason for our success. They are simply basic enough and touch people where they want to be touched. Some of them required massive amounts of staff homework and preparation, especially those which involved all members of the family. The selection of stories, or style of narrative, the tone and intensity of discussions, the very choice of language was difficult to gauge when working with mixed age groups. Thankfully, there was no great

heterogeneity in populations. For example, few traditional Jews attended the Jewish Experiential Weekend and problems of observance didn't come up. Because our programs were new they were attended by manageable numbers of people which allowed for personalization and follow-up. We got to know the people and "used" them as aides or volunteers, and, in some instances, invited them to become members of the Board Committee.

Initially, there was a cluster of programs which were designed as drop-ins, with no advance registration required. *The Jewish Family Hour* on Sundays from 3-4 p.m. and *The Learning Tree* on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons from 5:10-5:25 p.m. were intended to attract through beautiful displays, music, posters and the like . . . parents and/or children pausing between one activity and another, or waiting to pick up a ride home. They offered mini-programs, including songs, Jewish stories and legends, and simple dances. While families who came enjoyed the fun and the learning, it took up too much staff time. We never knew how many people would show up, how much food and material to prepare, how many and what kind of staff to assign. After two months, these programs were dropped.

Other programs were modified. Our 10-session workshop on *Human Sexuality and Family Life*, which was designed to help parents relate to grade schoolers and young teens around dating, masturbation, reproduction, and birth control, was too threatening. Instead, individual sessions were offered with presentations by experts followed by question-and-answer periods. These attracted between 5 and 10 couples for each of the 4 sessions, who were able to maintain a certain anonymity. Those who reached to us for additional sessions were promised a group in the fall

semester.

We changed the focus of a number of services. For example, in the Institute brochure there was a program called *In-Gathering* which was described as a program "for people who want to meet people and to test their inclinations for closeness and encounter." Well, our clients read the blurb as an invitation to set up a commune. What finally did emerge was a Young Couples Club of 14 couples who meet at the Y once a month for gym and swim and a social program, and once a month in one of their homes.

We offered *Focus: The Concerned Jewish Woman*, which we saw as an opportunity for Jewish women to discuss women's role in *halachic* and institutional Judaism. We couldn't get it off the ground until it was attached to a women's series which covered the broad spectrum of concerns and realities faced by women. Other programs went off exactly as envisioned with little or no structural or content changes. The following represents a summary of successful ones which this writer feels can be duplicated in most communities.

Jewish Family Workshops

Three series were offered in the spring, each one containing between 3 and 5 individual workshops. Y member and non-member parents and children could sign up for individual workshops at a fee of \$2.50 per family or could opt for a reduced series fee. The three series were:

Jewish Holiday workshops — including Tu B'Shvat, Purim and Pesach
Celebration of Life and Peoplehood — including The Joy of Birth, Jewish Marriage Canopy, and Mother's Day Workshop

Traditional Jewish Cookery Series — including Jewish breads and pastries, Knaidlach and Knishes, gefilte fish, and other delicacies. This last series was organized by a popular local "balabusteh" who supervised the cooking and baking. For one half-hour, a lecturer would come in and narrate stories and legends.

All sessions were popular, attracting a broad spectrum of people from our community. While the majority of participants were women and their daughters, the Holiday Workshops attracted many fathers and sons. Parents were more able to "take over" at the holiday workshops and felt more secure in engaging the staff and each other with questions and comments.

The director of the department himself led the holiday workshops and Celebration Series. After some trial and error, a workable approach emerged which was comprised of both joint and concurrent sessions for parents and children. A session would run two hours, usually on Sunday morning from 10 a.m.-12 noon or Sunday afternoons from 2-4 p.m. The morning session had few children over 8 years of age and staff was able to develop a more concentrated approach.

It is important to emphasize the tremendous preparation that went into these sessions, including the physical room set-up, staff coordination, preparation of materials, rehearsing of stories and dances. The intention was to make sessions spirited, focused, muscular and attractive. We wanted parents and children to be exposed to the best in adult Jewish learning materials, to Jewish children's magazines, and available Jewish recordings, tapes, and films.

The time and space format went generally as follows:

Three rooms were reserved for Sunday morning from 10 a.m. to 12 noon, one for the entire group of parents and children, one for children's activities, and one for very young children with their baby-sitter. The family room is spacious, with many comfortable couches and chairs. A display of books and objects related to the subject matter covers one or more tables. One long table is set up with hot and cold beverages, breads and spreads and pastries. The walls are decorated with posters

and pictures. Usually, a record player or tape recorder plays appropriate (to the subject) music and sometimes a film or slide show is part of the program. The children's activities room is set up in advance with special tables and chairs from the nursery school, arts and crafts supplies, music and other program materials. From 10-10:30 a.m. families help themselves to refreshments, browse among the books and materials laid out on the table, introduce themselves to one another, and meet the staff. From 10:30-11:00 a.m. the entire group hears a presentation by one or more of the staff on the story of the holiday or event we are celebrating — such as Pesach, Tu B'Shvat, Marriage, etc. — its importance to the Jewish people in history, and ways in which it is observed today. The focus of this initial presentation is the *child*. We alert the parents to pick up clues as to how they might introduce the subject or celebration in their own homes. From 11:00-11:45 a.m., the children leave with their counselors and the director stays on to chat with parents, to clarify issues, to respond to questions, to help them gain insight from and give support to each other. At 11:45 the children return with their finished or half-finished creations and we usually sing a song or two and learn a dance.

The sessions are "openers." Many parents stay on to continue talking and making plans. Others call the director in his office and ask for advice in purchasing some object, or in handling a problem with children or with parents. Some invite the director to their homes for further consultation. Many reappear at succeeding holiday workshops and workshops on the Jewish Life Cycle.

Special Events

Our special one-shot programs, well-publicized, carefully thought out

and supported by interested and involved lay leadership work. That was the gist of our experience. The Family Trip to the Lower East Side of New York, and the Mother's Day Challah Workshop, the evening discussion on Marriage Encounter, and so forth, were very well attended and appreciated. Our Family Weekend, our Sunday Specials for Single Parent Families, and our Shabbat afternoon parties are more problematic and require sophisticated staffing and heavy planning. For most communities they will prove to be delicate enterprises. A separate paper is needed to focus on these areas and to draw clear conclusions for the center field.

Ongoing Programs

Here the intention is to have families make a commitment to a learning process which helps them focus on their options and prepares them to make choices. The learning process involves checking out institutions and services in the community, "interviewing" Jewish functionaries, and sharing feelings and expectations with each other.

1. ESP — *Experiment in Synagogue Participation*

This peer-counseling group was designed to familiarize participating families with the synagogues and temples in the area, to enable them to share their questions and concerns with the group and with rabbis and other synagogue personnel, and to help them make decisions about whether to and where to belong. The group quickly mobilized itself to contact four synagogues they were interested in, attended services at the synagogues and met their rabbis and lay leaderships. Three of the four sent their school principals down to talk with the group. One group member, a CPA, did a breakdown of the costs and benefits of each institution. Another gave a report on her interpretation of the "openness" of each synagogue to new members. After the group termi-

nated, its members still continued to be friends and "go to Shul together."

2. BMC — *Bar and Bat Mitzvah Consultation*

Parents and the Bar or Bat Mitzvah meet together weekly to review options and plans for celebrating this event in the life of the family. Many experience uncertainty about the nature of the party, whom to invite, whether to prepare some special program in the synagogue, whether to send their child to Israel, and how to avoid getting on each other's nerves. One family had little money and asked the Y to help them organize an inexpensive party. We recommended a good grocery which stocked Israeli foods, referred the family to an Israeli dance teacher, and let the family use one of our rooms for the actual party. They reported that the Bat Mitzvah girl and her friends loved the evening. Families contacted their own needs and resources, financial and emotional, and commenced to plan accordingly. Parents saw their children more clearly and were able to align their demands with what their child was able to handle.

3. *The Third Meal*

Patterned after the *Seudah Shlishit*, this group program attracted six families who met on alternate Saturdays from 4:15-6:15 p.m., shared a Shabbat meal brought from home, learned Jewish stories and songs and dances. Each Shabbat session had one host family who coordinated the food arrangements, and one family who was responsible for the program. The director consulted with the families by phone and in person to help them prepare the menus, or the Torah interpretations. Parents were delighted to deliver the "Dvar Torah," and children were happy to teach the "chevrah," a Chassidic song or dance or help serve the desserts.

Conclusion: Directions for the Future

The Y has been energized by the Institute. Many professional staff, including the executive director, department heads, and division supervisors have appeared and often presented talks at these programs. A variety of programs have proliferated in other departments and many more are planned for the fall, including *Yom Mishpachah*, or Family Activity Day, which the Grade School Department will run for each class or group once a semester. During the summer, the Department of Family Program Services received its first grant from the Institute of Jewish Life and expects to apply for other funds for demonstration projects, including those that focus three-generation programs, the institution of marriage and problems faced by Jewish families in suburbia. We have begun meeting with representatives of the Jewish family agency to develop programs for the single parent family and expect soon to approach the local chapters of national service organizations for their cooperation in setting up a Jewish Organizational Fair geared to families. These possibilities are exciting. The process has been, and continues to be, a journey of one lucid and firm step following the previous one. We are now prepared to ask for additional professional staff and budgeting supports and expect that they will be forthcoming.

The old combination of effective professional staff supported by an available and committed executive, and then topped with deeply involved and powerful Board members came through and got the job done.