

# The Jewish Family Service Agency: Its Functions in the Jewish Community

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The question of what is "Jewish" about the Jewish family service agency has gained new importance in recent months even though this question has been raised for decades. This new importance is the result of a number of factors. The most important reasons are the increased sense of isolation the world Jewish community has felt since the Six-Day War in 1967 (which has been reinforced by the Yom Kippur War of 1973), and the continued threat of assimilation into the larger secular American society at a time the Jewish divorce rate is rising and the birth rate is on the verge of a possible decline. Amidst this increased sense of vulnerability both the Jewish community in general and the professionals in the field of Jewish communal service in specific<sup>1</sup> are feeling the need to justify Jewish communal service in terms of its Jewish content. Greenberg and Zeff showed the relevancy and continuity of the family service agency through the historic values and functions of *tzedakah* and *chesed*.<sup>2</sup> They showed how the family service agency transmits through modern organizations these traditional Jewish values that have characterized Judaism throughout the ages. Rubin went on to clarify differences between

the Jewish and the non-sectarian family service agencies striking home the point that "In the Jewish agencies those who received aid were members of the community themselves."<sup>3</sup> He elaborated how communal service agencies in Jewish society have the function of serving their own members, thus implying that the family agency is a direct expression of Jewish community interests.

However, behind the rationales for Jewish family services are the functions these agencies perform for their Jewish communities. I believe this is what needs to be stressed today at a time when more and more Jewish content is being seen as the criterion of relevancy for Jewish family service agencies. Since the major concern of Jewish communal service today seems to be the fostering of Jewish identity and the service that communal agencies have toward the maintenance or survival of the Jewish community, there is the feeling that Jewish content per se is the vehicle for communal agencies to foster these goals. It is natural to assume that knowledge of Judaism — Jewish history, literature, culture and religion — is at some basic level a pre-requisite to Jewish survival; unless group members know their uniqueness it will slowly slip away from existence.

The central question is whether such content is necessary to justify Jewish communal support of individual and family service agencies. In other words, is the ingredient for survival provided

<sup>1</sup> *Report of the Commission on Structure, Function and Priorities of the Organized Jewish Community* (National Conference of Jewish Communal Service, May 1974).

<sup>2</sup> Irving Greenberg and David Zeff, "The Jewish Casework Agency: Problems and Prospects in a Time of Paradox," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, (Fall 1965).

<sup>3</sup> Burton S. Rubin, "What's Jewish About Jewish Family Service," *Jewish Social Work Forum*, (Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Yeshiva University, Vol. 6, #1 Spring 1969).

by these agencies the Jewish content in their services? In stressing our Judaic roots, some have lost the perspective available in the sociological component inherent in our social work education. Functions supportive of community maintenance, of people-hood, evident in local community organization seem to have received insufficient attention. The Jewish philanthropic institutions, including the lay boards and social roles associated with these structures, have provided the vehicle for the maintenance of Jewish identity and community organization throughout Jewish history. One cannot properly understand the function of Jewish communal service agencies in general, and that of the Jewish family service agency in particular, unless one has an idea of the part societal organization has played in the Diaspora. Tcherikover states: "But the main reason for the existence of a Jewish diaspora culture was the vital strength of the Jewish communities. . . . the Jews always settled in groups, and the communal organization bound all the Jews of the locality into one body. . . . as long as the organized Jewish community stood firm, Jewish tradition — the belief in one God, circumcision, the Sabbath and the Festivals — remain solidly grounded."<sup>4</sup> Here is a historian of the early Diaspora stating it is specifically the organization of Jews into communities, i.e. the communal structure itself, that maintained Jewish tradition.

In a paper delivered at the 76th National Conference of Jewish Communal Service Kutzik<sup>5</sup> stresses the vital func-

<sup>4</sup> Victor Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1966) p. 356.

<sup>5</sup> Alfred J. Kutzik, "Jewish Communal Service, Jewish Identity, Jewish Community: An Historical-Sociological Perspective," (a paper presented at the National Conference of Jewish Community Service, June 1, 1974.)

tion of Jewish communal agencies to the survival of Judaism. After surveying sociological studies of American Jewish communities and historically reviewing Jewish tradition, Kutzik states, ". . . that Jewish social welfare has in every case not only contributed towards but been the major factor in unifying and maintaining the (Jewish) community . . ."<sup>6</sup> In relating the functions of Jewish social welfare organizations to the vitality of modern Judaism, Dinur states that, "All this sustained and intense activity, this ceaseless tapping of the forces latent in the nation, so far from weakening these primary cells of the social organism of Jewry, actually increased their vitality."<sup>7</sup> Here Dinur stresses that the communal complex of social welfare organizations, of Jews helping Jews, has been one of the main sources of internal strength pulling the community together and increasing its vitality in its very efforts to help itself. Thus historical inquiry would seem to belie the fact that Jewish content per se is needed in Jewish social service for it to maintain an impact on Jewish identity and communal survival. However, it does point out the centrality of the maintenance of the Jewish organizational framework as one of the most important links in the survival of Judaism.

#### Principles Underlying Jewish Sectarian Agencies

I see three principles underpinning the existence of the Jewish family agency. First is the right of the Jewish community to a corporate existence. This is fundamental not only to Jewish communal service, but to the Jewish community itself. As has been stressed above from a historical perspective, the continuance of Judaism both as a reli-

<sup>6</sup> Alfred J. Kutzik, *ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Ben Zion Dinur, *Israel and The Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society 1969), pp. 109-10.

gion and an ethnic culture is dependent upon the Jewish community's having a separate structural continuity. Second, is the right in a democratic society to express an ethnic choice in social service selection. In a free society there need be freedom of choice for clients to select sectarian counseling services. The very fact that this choice has been made leads to the conclusion that such agencies have special meaning and perhaps greater comfort for clients because there is a common bond of identity with the Jewish community and fellow Jews as embodied in the workers of the family service agency.<sup>8</sup> And lastly, there is no distinctive entity of "Jewish" social work that is fundamentally different in process from that of generic social work practice. While it is true that good social work practice in the family agency must take into account cultural and religious factors, this itself is a principle of social work (whether this can be fully done by a non-sectarian agency can be questioned but is not the central point).

#### Functions of the Jewish Family Service Agency

The above three principles lead to an understanding of the Jewish family service agency as one of a number of basic social building blocks in the organized Jewish community. Thus, as Miller has stated, ". . . Jewish communal services are more than mechanisms for doing things for people. They are social institutions of the Jewish community, their very existence expressing our historic, religious and cultural values. Their support calls for unified communal effort and they are therefore unifying influences. They are visible symbols of united com-

<sup>8</sup> *The Values of Jewish Family Service to the Client and the Community: A Rationale for the Jewish Family Agency*, (New York: Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, April 1954).

munities, visible to the clients, to Jews, and to non-Jews. They are therefore concrete affirmation of the will of the Jewish community to maintain its sectarian identity, to develop, and to survive."<sup>9</sup> Thus the Jewish family service agency is one of a complex of communal agencies that are cornerstones of Jewish communal existence. Again, this is verified by Kutzik who states that ". . . the overall conclusion of this (his) study of American Jewish social welfare throughout the more than three centuries of its existence is that, despite certain contrary effects, it has predominantly maintained the Jewish group and the Jewish identity of its members."<sup>10</sup> He later states in this same paper, "Far from finding that the institutional role of American Jewish social welfare is a departure from or perversion of Jewish tradition, it (his study) discovered that Jewish social welfare has had the same basic function and dysfunctions for diaspora communities from late biblical-Babylonia to contemporary Argentina."<sup>11</sup>

As a part of the Jewish community's organizational structure the Jewish family service agency functions in a number of distinctive ways. The first distinctive manner of functioning is that agency services are related to the needs and priorities within the Jewish community. The Jewish agencies develop and implement their various programs in response to the cultural, social and mental health needs demanding priority in their respective Jewish communities. In some circles it had been assumed the priority of needs in Jewish social welfare were similar to those in the general community (with

<sup>9</sup> Charles Miller, "The Jewishness of Jewish Social Service," (paper delivered at the 40th General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, November 13, 1971).

<sup>10</sup> Alfred J. Kutzik, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

the possible exception of immigrant resettlement). However, the past decade has revealed a widening difference of legitimate priorities between the non-sectarian family social agency and those of Jewish family service agencies. For instance, one of the priorities in non-sectarian agency practice is assistance to unwed mothers. However, this would not be an over-riding priority for most Jewish family service agencies. Today Jewish family service agencies have increasing need to counsel young divorcees with children, a disturbingly growing high-risk group in the Jewish population. Throughout the 60's and continuing into the 70's there has been major concern with poverty, specifically as it affects disadvantaged minorities in the general family service field. Jewish family agencies too are concerned about poverty; however the emphasis has been largely upon the aged who make up the bulk of the Jewish poor, and in the larger cities, the significant numbers of impoverished Jews who are often excluded from the general poverty programs in American society.

This disparity of priorities between the non-sectarian and the Jewish family service agency is operationalized as the Jewish agency relates not only to individual clients, but to the Jewish community as a whole (just as many secular family service agencies reach out into the inner city to meet general community priorities). The Jewish family service agency thus serves the Jewish community in relation to its own internal concerns.

This relationship of the Jewish family service agency to the pressing needs and priorities within its Jewish community is important as it illustrates that it is not sufficient to just have a knowledge of Jewish religion and culture to be of service to Jewish clients (a function which is theoretically possible for a non-sectarian agency to fulfill). It is

doubtful that the social welfare priorities in the Jewish community could ever become the dominant concerns of a non-sectarian family service agency that must serve and be concerned with priorities in the general community.

Secondly, the Jewish family service agencies provide certain functions which non-sectarian family service agencies rarely if ever provide. The clearest example is the New Americans program for Jewish refugee resettlement. It would be absurd to think non-sectarian family service agencies would spend thousands of dollars on such programs as has been done by Jewish agencies in coordination with local Jewish Federations (or that United Way boards would finance the magnitude of such help). As family life education projects begin to encompass greater Jewish content related to Jewish identity and greater intensity of Jewish family living, it becomes clearer this unique focus of family life education is a service likely only to be promoted by Jewish agencies. Another service differentially provided is the scholarship loan programs for local Jewish students many Jewish family service agencies administer. It is easily seen that this second manner of functioning in providing certain distinctive services is related to the first function of relating family services to the current needs within the Jewish community.

The third distinctive manner of functioning for Jewish family social agencies is their cooperation and joint programming with other local Jewish communal organizations.

It is not necessary to elaborate here the many projects and programs that have been developed among such institutions as Jewish family service agencies, Jewish Centers, Jewish homes for the aged and Jewish vocational services. The important point is the cumulative

impact upon the welfare of their Jewish communities and their individual constituent members that such cooperative ventures affect. Beyond cooperative efforts with other Jewish communal service agencies, many Jewish family service agencies work cooperatively with Jewish membership organizations such as synagogues, B'nai B'rith groups, Jewish women's organizations, and Hebrew schools. Such agency functioning relates the Jewish family service agency to concerns within the entire Jewish community, and places the family agency in the service of the organized Jewish community itself. Inevitably this leads back to sectarian agencies providing services geared to the distinctive needs within its sectarian community. Thus while social welfare needs can be met in isolated fashion for certain individual clients, be they Jewish or not, through non-sectarian agency services, it is highly unlikely that the range and magnitude of social welfare problems within Jewish communities would anywhere near adequately be addressed except through a system of Jewish communal service agencies. This also illustrates the principle that there is need for a system or complex of Jewish communal agencies which together form a vital part of the fabric of Jewish communal organization in the United States.

Another aspect of Jewish family service agencies in relation to the overall Jewish community is the involvement of Board members and volunteers as well as professional staff in maintaining the daily operation of these agencies. Tremendous individual effort goes into maintaining these agencies, which in turn provide a vehicle for perpetuating interest, concern and identification with the Jewish community for these people.<sup>12-13</sup>

It should be noted that in accordance with good social work practice, Jewish

content can be both infused into and pulled from clinical practice in the Jewish family service agency. While infusion of Jewish content can theoretically be accomplished in any agency setting and by any worker knowledgeable of Jewish religion and Jewish ethnic culture, the case can be made that this practice is largely confined to Jewish agency settings where there is specific sensitivity to such concerns. Such infusion needs continued investigation, and is currently receiving the attention it deserves. That Jewish religious and cultural dimensions are receiving attention on the clinical level today illustrates Jewish communal service realizes the importance of the Judaic heritage to personality formation and family functioning. This integration of Judaic content also illustrates the successful working out of ambivalences about Jewish identity that have been present among some agency staff members. Looking at the increased attention this Jewish content area is receiving today, the Jewish family service field is on its way to making strides in the integration of this aspect into clinical practice.

I have discussed at the end of this paper "Jewish content" aspects of Jewish family service agency functioning, not because it is unimportant, but because it is, in my opinion, not the paramount value which the Jewish family agency imparts to the Jewish community. More important are the values related to sociological functions fulfilled by the Jewish family service agency in the Jewish communal structure,<sup>14</sup> and the specific mental health and social welfare functions such agencies perform for the Jewish community in relation to its own internal priorities. From a functional point of view it can

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *The Values of Jewish Family Service to the Client and the Community, op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> Alfred J. Kutzik, *op. cit.*

be seen that the Jewish family service agency contributes to the maintenance of a system of an organized Jewish community, which itself is historically needed as the vehicle for providing Jewish identification both on the religious and ethnic levels. Let me close by quoting Ahad Ha'am ". . . Judaism conceives its aim not as the salvation of

the individual, but as the well-being and perfection of a group, of the Jewish people, and ultimately of the whole human race."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ahad Ha'am, "Character of Judaism," in Simon Noveck, ed., *Contemporary Jewish Thought: A Reader*, (B'nai B'rith Great Book Series: Vol. IV, B'nai B'rith Department of Adult Jewish Education, 1963) p. 9.