

## The Rabbi and the Social Worker — Cooperation or Separation\*

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*It is my passionate belief that both professions (rabbinate and social work) are engaged in communal work which in our times is . . . necessary for the mental health of our community. . . . the roles of the rabbi and social worker are both rooted in our history and tradition and obtain sanction from the Torah itself.*

I WRITE not as a profound thinker, but one whose major qualification is a "Ph.D." in *tachlis*. Conference meetings are too often exercises in futility and psychological mechanisms in order to avoid *tachlis*. When the Jews were offered the Torah at Mt. Sinai, they responded with *n'aaseh vinishma* (we will do and listen). In other words, the Jews were ready to accept the burdens and responsibilities of the Torah and having done that, they would then conduct conferences and workshops.

Much has been written on the subject of creating understanding and rapport between rabbis and Jewish communal workers; workshops and conferences have been held periodically. Thus, it is difficult to add anything in this paper new to what has been written and stated hundreds of times.

Every *Simchat Torah* we complete the reading of the Torah and immediately proceed to re-read it over the coming year. Yet every time we re-read it, we gain new insights into Judaism. Perhaps this effort which repeats a familiar topic, will lead to fresh insights on this all-important subject.

It is illuminating to discuss this problem in Hegelian terms of thesis, antithesis and synthesis.

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### Thesis

For centuries the rabbi performed the role of counsellor, mentor, spiritual and temporal guide for his flock. As did the prophets of yore, the rabbi exhorted his people to positive Jewish living, his greater fulfillment of spiritual values, comforted them and taught them to be good Jews, respected citizens, children, parents and neighbors. "The rabbi will sincerely advise and help" was the perennial hope of countless Jews who depended on him in terms of personal, family and communal crisis. In joy and in sorrow, in the greatest hour of need, in times of emergency and calamity, the rabbi's word often meant comfort to the stricken and balm to the wounded. This reverence still exists to this day among Chasidim in relation to their rebbe. The rebbe's word is binding on his adherents. He is the spiritual leader, the social worker and the psychiatrist.

### Antithesis

This phenomenon remained valid even in America so long as the synagogue continued to be the spiritual and temporal headquarters of the Jewish community. As life in America became more industrialized and more secular the social and humanitarian services were removed, one by one by one, from the house of worship and transferred to newly established secular institutions in

the field of the aged, child care, family services, etc. This was the beginning of antithesis.

### Synthesis

It is only in recent times that some of us have begun to look for the synthesis — a way in which the rabbi and the Jewish communal worker can work together in amity and not in competition.

Late in 1952 the Department on Religious Affairs of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York convened a group of rabbis and social workers in order to create a dialogue. I recall the hostility of my colleagues in the rabbinate and the skepticism of some of my colleagues in the social work profession. It seemed at that time that the distance between the two disciplines would be difficult to bridge. Each discipline seemed to be perched on its own mountain top. Separating them was a valley of indifference. It appeared to me at that time that cooperation between the rabbi and the social worker was a task almost impossible to achieve. Yet, that inauspicious beginning led gradually to the creation of the Commission of Synagogue Relations and through that instrumentality the establishment of a number of committees in which rabbis and social workers became involved and are, indeed, still involved to this day. Thus, the Commission's Task Forces dealing with Inter-marriage; Marriage and Divorce; Religious Institutions and the Y; Jewish Singles; Mental Health and Judaism; Alcoholism and the Jewish Community; The Jewish Family; Jewish Population and Employment and Vocational Guidance for the Jewish Community. These programs and many others, too numerous to mention, have led to cooperative programs between Y's and synagogues; between family agencies and synagogues; between employment, guidance and rehabilitative services and synagogues. The Committee on Publica-

tions has issued a number of important volumes through these years aimed at educating the rabbi and the Jewish communal worker: *Judaism in the Community*; *New Directions in the Jewish Family*; *The Jewish Family in a Changing World*; *New Directions in the Jewish Family and Community*; *The Rabbi and the Jewish Social Worker* and many others.

Through the years we have sponsored workshops and conferences in an attempt to get Jewish communal workers and rabbis to know each other and to work with each other. In order to bring the rabbi closer to our agencies, each agency has appointed a particular person who is the liaison between that agency and the rabbi and thus expedites the rabbi's inquiries concerning specific referrals from the synagogue. The Commission twenty-one years ago helped to establish the Jewish Orientation Training Seminars conducted by the local Board of Jewish Education, which aims at giving social workers and members of the boards of our agencies a better understanding of Jewish history, culture and tradition. In this program, we have involved rabbis of all ideologies, synagogue lay leaders as well as lay and professional leaders of our social work agencies. We have strived for an ongoing conference of Jews, Jews and Jews.

I suppose that in New York and elsewhere we can be proud of the measure of success we have had in these endeavors, but a problem of "cooperation or separation" still remains, otherwise this matter would not be on the agenda today. One of the basic problems remains the fact that we are not a monolithic community. Let us pause to recognize that there are four distinct Jews with whom we must deal. First, there are the secular assimilationists: Jewish by birth, they are not concerned about survival and the threat of assimilation; yet, from their ranks come some of the most generous contributors to Jewish

communal causes and the Jewish community's most ardent workers. Second, there is the secular survivalist: he represents a significant number of our people who are totally unconcerned with Judaism as a religion, but who are passionate in their determination that the Jewish people survive. Third is the synagogue-affiliated Jew who belongs because of a sense of conformity, but who would be hard put to define what Judaism means to him. Fourth is the synagogue-affiliated survivalist who is committed to the Jewish religion and to Jewish peoplehood and concerned about transmitting these values to his children. These then represent the people with whom we must work and surely the rabbi who, by and large, deals with a homogeneous group must understand this and sympathize with the social worker, whose function it is to create a rapport with every Jew, no matter what label he carries. Let us recognize that Judaism rarely presented a monolithic structure, that the schools of Hillel and Shmai, that the period immediately after the death of Maimonides, and that the struggle between the Chassidim and the Misnagdim represented Judaism in a state of flux and growth.

It is the rare rabbi who recognizes this dilemma. If a Jewish communal institution, be it a "Y", a family agency or a child care agency, must deal with every type of Jew, the problems confronting the social worker are immense. Another reality which we cannot escape is the growing sectarianism among Jews. In New York this has led lately to the establishment of a counselling service under the auspices of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (Reform). Several child care agencies as well as a counselling service have been established by the Agudas Israel and Chassidic groups. More and more rabbis are going into pastoral counselling, obtaining degrees in psychology and setting up their own prac-

tice. In addition to the historic friction between the rabbi and the secularly trained Jewish social worker, and in addition to the growing sectarianism in the Jewish community, old age suspicions have not yet been laid to rest. Social workers, trained in secular professional schools, still come to work in agencies, the workers without any Jewish background, and if not with a hostile attitude toward Yiddishkeit, certainly without a positive one. We have found that orientation courses are hardly enough. There must be commitment on the part of Jewish social workers to the Jewish community and to its values. The Bible of many still remains the writings of Freud, Jung, Adler, etc., while totally disregarding Jewish law and, indeed, looking upon Jewish tradition as antiquated and irrelevant. Boards of agencies are often represented by fine men and women who, if not hostile to Yiddishkeit, are ready to pay it mere lip service. In many instances, even though the director and some of the supervisors of a particular agency may be deeply committed to the Jewish component in social work, this commitment simply does not trickle down to the line workers.

Even today questions are still raised concerning the Jewish component in social work. Surprisingly, this question is even raised by social workers with rich Jewish backgrounds. I have found that some such workers have become so enamoured with social work "Torah" that they have completely shunted aside what Jewish tradition and Torah have to say about human relations.

The rabbi is also concerned with the fact that he often refers a difficult case only to learn that this Jewish agency to which he made the referral has assigned the case to a non-Jewish social worker. "Why," asks the rabbi, "a non-Jewish social worker?" He believes, as I do, that Maurice Hexter was right when he said "Only Jewish eyes can understand the

suffering of another Jew." He does not, as I do not, believe that a non-Jewish social worker, no matter how knowledgeable, can understand what a *tallis* and *tfillin* mean to the client or patient sitting across the desk. He, as I, cannot understand how an outstanding mental hospital under Jewish auspices treats the ultra Orthodox and Chassidic patients in the same manner as any other patient. Nor can I understand when the director of that institution states, "there is no Jewish component in our method of treatment". How sad it was to find during our recent seminars conducted by a group of eminent Jewishly committed psychiatrists for psychiatric residents and psychiatric case workers, that our students were totally ignorant about Jewish holidays, religious practices and the general meaning of *Yiddishkeit*.

We live in an age today where the whole world seems to be conspiring against the Jew. Israel is in mortal danger. In our own country the threat of assimilation, intermarriage and zero population growth threaten to decimate the Jewish community. Yet, I still find that social workers talk about a non-judgmental attitude.

Some years ago, Martha Selig, in my opinion, laid to rest this canard when she said "In essence, the casework or counselling process has as its being an ongoing and disciplined relationship with the client. The essential character of this relationship provides for the fullest opportunity for self-confrontation and self-determination, in an atmosphere of acceptance, devoid of any censorious attitude, or categorical imperatives. This must not be confused with non-judgmental attitudes, for judgements as evaluation are constantly being made by the social worker with his skill, knowledge, background and understanding."<sup>1</sup> And yet, at a recent conference, a

<sup>1</sup> In Morris N. Kertzer, ed., *The Rabbi and the Jewish Social Worker*, Commission on Synagogue Re-

traditional social worker, the wife of an Orthodox rabbi, in discussing the handling of a case involving intermarriage, followed the same "party line" which was so popular in the days when Jewish social work was totally secular and, indeed, antagonistic to the Jewish component.

How can a rabbi, or a Jewish family which looks toward a Jewish agency to resolve a painful problem of intermarriage, feel when a social worker says in effect "if marrying this *goy* will make you happy, God bless you"? Those of us in the Jewish community who are concerned about Jewish survival, look to a Jewish communal agency as an instrument for Jewish survival and not as an instrument of permissiveness. Without Jews there is no Jewish community. The walls between the secular and the religious must crumble as we become concerned more and more with the welfare and identity of Jews. Rabbis have been wrestling with these concerns for a long time. Social workers possess the expertise, the experience and the systematic approach that are needed if we are to halt the downward trend of Jewish institutional life by the new Jewish generation. What a role for the social worker who often reaches the unaffiliated Jew and should assume the responsibility of bringing back the unaffiliated Jew to the Jewish community and not to confirm his secularity!

I don't think it's necessary for me to spell out the differences of the role of the rabbi and the Jewish social worker respectively. I do not intend to bring coals to Newcastle or the Torah to Mt. Sinai. It's true that the rabbi is primarily committed to tradition and the social worker to the health and happiness of the individual. Jewish social work began with the rabbis who used their experience with human relations, the eternal verities of their faith and a shrewd wisdom to carry

lations, Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, New York, 1960.

out their work. The most important task that we have and which must continue on a regular basis is the friendly intermingling, the social exchanges and joint undertakings between rabbis and Jewish communal workers. The more frequently they meet, the more they will understand each other. A close relationship between rabbis and social workers may have been a wonderful luxury at one time. Today their close cooperation is a necessity. I am referring to communication. When a rabbi refers a synagogue member to a social work agency, it is imperative that he talk with the social worker. There is a responsibility on the part of the social worker to call the rabbi on occasion and to keep him advised of the progress of the family he referred. It is frustrating to make a referral and then not to know what happened. George Rothman stated, "Rabbis should be eager to know community agencies and social workers should serve rabbis in their area and learn to know them as people. It is now fashionable to reach out. Let the rabbi and the social worker, therefore, reach out to each other. The combined knowledge of the two makes for an excellent approach toward the development of new and exciting services. When social workers reach out to synagogues, to talmud torahs and to yeshivas, we reach a new dimension in service to our people and create a *shidduch* between the rabbi, the synagogue and the social worker. I am talking about mutual trust — the confidence which the Jewish religious leader has in the positive orientation of the social worker and the feeling of assurance within the mind of the social worker that his rabbinic colleague is sensitive to the demands of the modern world and is humble enough to seek counsel in areas which are likely beyond his special competence".<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> George Rothman, in *New Directions in the Jewish Family and Community*, Commission on Synagogue

In medicine there is an awareness that life can be saved by individuals who could help a stricken man until the doctor arrives: "first-aid." Such first-aid courses should be given to rabbis to help the stricken until professional help is obtained. We have tried this in New York, but have failed. Rabbis simply did not sign up for this project. This attempt should be made again. The training of a rabbi to recognize what can be handled by him and which should be referred is a must. Certainly this is true in marriage counselling. The complicated case can be referred to an agency, while the relatively simpler case can be handled by a rabbi. I cannot resist a Biblical reference. A similar proposal was made to our teacher Moses in the desert by his father-in-law. He saw Moses constantly in demand all day and into the night to render legal decisions in the newly given law. His suggestion was to choose wise men to act as judges for the simpler cases and refer only the complicated ones to Moses for adjudication. And so it was. The first organization of lower and higher courts was accomplished. Our agencies are constantly in demand with an overload of cases. Perhaps the rabbis can act as preliminary counsellors at least in one area, marriage. By handling the simpler cases, they will bring respite to our over-worked agencies.

I referred previously to the establishment of social work agencies by ideological groups. This often points up the failure of a particular Federation supported agency to serve the needs of the total Jewish community. I am deeply troubled that unless communal agencies are sensitive to the Jewish component, we will witness synagogue groups doing what the church has done for a long time. There are priests and ministers who are trained social workers, psychiatrists and

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psychologists. This may be the direction of the future no matter what we say or do. Can our communal agencies serve all segments of the Jewish community? Are they ready to recognize the group ethnicity and the demand for Jewish communal agencies serving Jews as Jews without diluting the purpose of the agency by non-sectarian and open-door policies? Let us recognize that in spite of the frightening rate of assimilation and intermarriage, there is fast arising a neo-Orthodox community. These are Jews born in this country who are Traditional and strictly observant, who raise large families and are found in business and every profession. They are not immune to the social ills which are endemic to the American civilization. Divorce, drug problems, mental breakdowns, the single parent family, all of these problems beset this so-called Torah-true community. Can our agencies serve these people or must they set up their own family, child-care, aged facilities, etc. These groups have learned that government funding is not only available to communal sponsored agencies which often use such funding as an excuse for non-sectarian policies. These groups not only obtain government funds, but establish social work agencies on sectarian bases. They often have the courage of their convictions.

In order for the rabbi and social worker to understand each other's role and to overcome the long history of hostility and the feeling of competitiveness, they must meet — and often — to exchange views and to discuss mutual problems. There is no esoteric, mystic or complicated road to understanding. None of us has all the answers. At times, none of us is too sure where the role of a rabbi stops and where a social worker begins. Undoubtedly there are areas of overlapping. When does a rabbi refer to a social worker? When does a social worker refer to a rabbi? When do they

cooperate and work together? We have tried to give some tentative answers but a *modus operandi* can only be achieved if the rabbi and social worker meet and tackle these sensitive problems. In such a way the rabbi will learn the role played by modern social work agencies and how to obtain sanction for performance of welfare services for the Jewish community. In this way the rabbi will become familiar with the technical services rendered by social work agencies and what professional training and Jewish background is required of workers to help clients in meeting their Jewish as well as their personal problems. In this way the social worker will realize that the rabbi's help in the counselling process is sometimes imperative and almost always helpful in understanding the total personality of his client. This is particularly true in the area of marital counselling where experience has shown that many people will turn to the rabbi as well as to a social work agency.

Jointly they will realize that the roles of the rabbi and social worker are both rooted in our history and tradition and obtain sanction from the Torah itself. In other words social service is a positive commandment enunciated many times in the Bible.

Most important, we must resolve the ambivalence which still exists today in our social work profession. Perhaps this can best be spelled out by Rabbi Hillel's famous injunction, "*Im ain ani, li mi li, ukh she-ani l'atmi meh ani.*"

There are those who say, "If I am not for myself, who will be?" that institutions under Jewish auspices must serve only Jews. There are those who say, "If I am not for myself, what am I?" Those people profess the non-sectarian policy. The danger is that we may become engulfed in the unfathomable abyss of secularism, wherein the Jewish nature of our programs will suffer irretrievably. The question we must ask ourselves, with Rabbi

Hillel is, "If not now, when?" The ambivalence must be resolved. I submit that the answer must lie in a philosophy which says: "We are a Jewish agency committed to Jewish values and Jewish survival. Wherever possible, we will not close our doors to non-Jews who seek our services, but this service must neither negate or dilute our primary responsibilities." The danger of a minority culture becoming engulfed is precisely what the Bible had in mind when it spoke about "the statutes of the Gentiles." It is a tragic fact of our existence as Jews that a great religion, the prophetic faith and culture of our people, the cornerstone of morality and religion in the Western world, has often been reduced to a technique of minority adjustment, an antidote to an inferiority complex. We must cease being frantically preoccupied with our survival as Jews and become wisely and deeply concerned with our total lives as Jewish persons. Many things separate us, but we have one thing in common. We may differ on what we mean by such words as Jewish people, or God, or revelation. We have one word in common — our least common denominator. It is the most important fact for each of us and all of us together. The word is the name *Jew*. The wisdom of the Bible recognized this early when in the second book it states, "*vai leh shmoot bnei yisroel*." "And these are the names of the children of Israel". Commentaries asked why the Bible, which is so concerned with economy of language, must repeat the names of Jacob's sons after they were enumerated in the preceding chapter. I would like to suggest a modern interpretation as to why the names were repeated. We know that even in Egypt, 4,000 years ago, there were Zionists, Nationalists, pro-Egyptians and other types of Jews. That is why each tribe had to be enumerated separately. But they had one thing in common — they were all the children of Israel.

Let us all recognize that we must stand together behind the banner of Tzedakah, the great symbol, the glory, the power and the essence of much of Judaic civilization. The price of divisiveness can only lead to agencies under ideological auspices. Let the word *Jewish* bind us and not separate us. The Jews, Moses complained, are a stiff-necked people, but I am reminded of the old song, "*vas mir zeinen, zeinen mir, ober Idin zeinen mir*"; what we are we are, but Jews we are.

Many centuries and millenia separate us from our Father Abraham. By our concept of Tzedakah and concern for our fellow human beings, we are his spiritual heirs.

Abraham was told to leave his land and *lech l'cha ma'arts cha*, his father's home and to wander into a strange land. We rabbis and social workers must re-examine some of our shop-worn ideas and pet theories that we have about ourselves and about each other. We must go out and try to re-establish and re-kindle our kinship to Father Abraham. In 1956 I said, "To those skeptics in both professions — and I know some — who feel that the irresistible force of the rabbinate, and the immovable fortress of the social worker cannot meet, my answer is simple: we in New York have succeeded to a large extent. Let rabbis and social workers in every community give it a chance! If you will plant with patience, you will reap rich rewards in the vineyard of human relations."<sup>3</sup>

It is my passionate belief that both professions are engaged in communal work which in our times is as necessary for the mental health of our community as medicine is for the physical well-being of

<sup>3</sup> From an unpubl. paper delivered to Annual Conference of the Rabbi and Social Worker sponsored by the Commission on Synagogue Relations, Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, New York, 1956.

humanity. Social work in its broadest implication is that phase of communal work extolled on each Sabbath in this prayer: "And all those who are engaged in communal work with sincerity may the Lord give them their due reward." When Abraham and his son Isaac went up to Mt. Moriah, the Bible states: "And they both went together." The rabbi and the Jewish social worker are both climbing the Mt. Moriah of service to their people. Surely they must tread the path together.

I believe in our joint mission with all

the fervor and passion at my command. Moses stood on Mt. Nebo in the Land of Moab and looked into the promised land which he would never enter. We, today, stand on the mountain facing an uncertain future for American Judaism.

To me the task is clear, the objectives are lofty and eternal. The time? Rabbi Hillel put it best, "*Im lo akh shav aima tai*."

If not now, when? Hillel did not mean this to be a pious hope — a poetic hyperbole. He meant *tachlis!* The time is now — tomorrow may be too late.