

Toward a Definition of Tomorrow's Jewish Community Center*

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The Center movement started with small literary organizations designed to meet social and intellectual needs. These organizations evolved into building-centered institutions serving the whole community. . . . the emphasis will shift towards the development of an ideology providing a generic base for Mass Jewish education. The Center will maintain its traditionally "neutral"—that is, non-denominational—stance . . .

I find it historically appropriate that the request to present a paper defining tomorrow's Jewish community center should have been made by Bernie Rosen, Executive Director of the Jewish Community Center of Greater Baltimore, for it was in Baltimore in 1854 that the first YMHA was born.

This Baltimore Y was preceded in the 1840's by literary and debating societies which adopted the name "Young Men's Hebrew Literary Societies". To a certain extent we can assume that the name defined the nature of the organization. We also know that it defined certain prohibitions to their activities. There was to be no card-playing, gambling and drinking. Despite these limitations, it is evident that these societies met a need for socializing and social bonding.¹

This first YMHA in Baltimore was founded just three years after the founding of the first American YMCA. Its facilities consisted mainly of reading rooms, and the first paid officer was a librarian, indicating its major purpose. Other communities followed Baltimore's example. This native American Jewish institution was on its way.

Although there was a slow-down in Jewish immigration during the period

of 1865 to 1880, Ys grew in number immediately after the Civil War, especially in the South and Mid-West. The early definitions and activities of these Ys began to lay down the base for the future. While it is often felt that one of the major functions of these early Ys was to help the immigrant Jew acculturate to the American experience, we find concern expressed over 100 years ago about the preservation of Jewish life.

The constitution of the Cincinnati Y, established in 1867, set forth its aims as follows:

The Association was organized for the purpose of cultivating and fostering a better knowledge of the history, literature and doctrines of Judaism; to develop and elevate our mental and moral character; to entertain and edify ourselves with such intellectual agencies as we may deem fit, finally and above all, it is our mission to promulgate the sublime and eternal principles of Judaism to the world, and when necessary to defend, though honorably and peaceably, the faith of our ancestors.

The Y movement continued to gain adherents. From 1876 to 1890 some 108 Ys were established. The purposes of acculturation to America came to full flower during the period of heavy immigration from the 1880s to 1920, in the offering of English classes, lectures, library and courses in marketable skills, such as machine sewing especially in the major urban areas.²

* Presented at the Metropolitan City Center Executive Seminar, Pompano Beach, Florida, February 21, 1982.

¹ Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox, *The Imperial Animal*. New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1971.

² Louis Kraft, *A Century of the Jewish Community*

In 1913, the National Council of Young Men's Hebrew and Kindred Associations was formed; it was the first permanent organization of centers and Ys. In 1917, the Jewish Welfare Board was founded to meet the World War I religious and welfare needs of Jews in the American Armed Forces. In 1921, these two organizations merged and JWB became the national association of Jewish community centers and YM-YWHAs. This new organization was to play an increasingly useful role in the development of centers and Ys.

During the depression, Ys struggled to stay afloat. I remember with what pride our late colleague Lou Kraft, who was Director of Jewish Center Activities for JWB until 1939 and then became JWB's Executive Director, told me that not a single Y closed then. During that dark period, Ys provided vocational training and guidance, recreation and support of Jewish purposes in the face of a rising anti-Semitism.

During World War II, Ys continued their normal programs and made their facilities available to USOs to serve servicemen. Building programs were held in abeyance.

With the end of the war a building boom took place that is still going on. This boom was occasioned partly by the need to replace obsolete buildings or to locate buildings in new areas of settlement. But mostly it was fueled by the need to provide greatly expanded service to communities that perceived the Center as a place where many individual and familial needs were met. An explosion of programs took place: day camps, teen travel camps, the fine arts, the performing arts, nursery schools, athletics and sports, services to the aged, informal education, specialized services to particular groups, the housing of other

organizations within the walls of the Center, to name just some. Buildings were and still are getting bigger and bigger.

I am informed by Arthur Rotman, Executive Vice-President of JWB, that 135 communities have Center buildings and 50 communities are involved in some kind of building program, that is, they are either building a new building or adding to an existing one. Centers and Ys are entering a stage of full flowering as the seeds of the past have sprouted and grown.

What, then, is our base line definition for today, and from which we can look towards tomorrow? I would venture the following:

A Jewish community center or Y is a unique institution in the Jewish community providing cultural and social activities, recreation, formal and informal education, counselling, and health and physical education services to people of all ages, from infants to the elderly, and community organization services to the Jewish community, under the supervision of professional staffs educated in the fields of social work, teaching, health and physical education and the fine and performing arts.

Perhaps this definition could serve for the future as well? But what the definition doesn't tell us is where the emphasis for the future should be placed and what the nature of the institution should be.

Uniqueness Again and the Jewish Future

At the conference of the Metropolitan City Center Executives Seminar four years ago, two colleagues presented papers on whether or not the Center is unique. One concluded that it is not unique and the other agreed, but felt that it was at least special.^{3,4}

Center Movement. New York: National Jewish Welfare Board, 1953.

³ Harry Kosansky, "The Jewish Community Center—We may not be unique, But We Are Very Special," presented at the annual meeting of the

It is not my purpose to review those papers, which in the course of the debate nevertheless shed light on the current nature of our institution. I do, however, wish to take the position that the Center is unique with the intent of showing how that uniqueness can be used for the future of the Jewish community.

The uniqueness of the Center stems from: (1) the totality of its services in one agency; (2) being seen as one-of-a-kind in the community by Federation, other Jewish institutions and the Jewish public; (3) its being an institution that is common to the whole Jewish community and having appeal to Jews of all persuasions. It does not promote or require a commitment to a particular religious, political or secular philosophy or ideology.

It is this third aspect of uniqueness that is both the strength and weakness of the Center. It should be examined with reference to its potential for helping develop the Jewish future. It may be the most valuable pivotal point for the Jewish community.

This unique position of neutrality is a strength because it enables the Center to attract the broadest spectrum of people, although it will not likely attract the extremes of left and right.

Sanford Solender felt that

Jews who are seeking answers to the dilemmas of their Jewishness have little interest in particular Jewish ideologies and doctrines. Here, too, the Center has a special function. Its non-doctrinaire commitment is to the universals in the Jewish heritage. All points of view are expressed in the Center but it does not advocate commitment to a particular orientation.

Metropolitan City Executive Directors, Hollywood, Florida, January 1978; this *Journal*, Vol. LIV, No. 4, pp. 314-20.

⁴ Morris Levin, "The New Unique Function of the Jewish Community Center", presented at the annual meeting of the Metropolitan City Executive Directors, Hollywood, Florida, 1978; this *Journal*, Vol. LV, No. 3, pp. 260-64.

Openness and questioning are encouraged, and the doubter never feels that by voicing his reservations he is guilty of disloyalty or sacrilege. Such an environment is indispensable to enabling masses of Jews in search of self-understanding to find their way.⁵

The weakness of this position of neutrality is that too often it ends in the avoidance of any action at all, one way or the other. The major weakness of neutrality is that it inhibits the Center from developing a Jewish ideology through which it can transmit Jewish values, tradition, culture, ideas, history and heritage to its members. In the view of Benjamin Halpern, the Center movement needs "a clear articulation of the specific forms of Judaism" with which it can "identify itself, which it can defend as its own cause."⁶

In his study, Carl Urbont stated that "the Center . . . lacks a strong ideological base to preserve its identity as a Jewish institution." One of the conclusions of his findings was that "the operating purposes today indicate a more generalized level of operation in the form of recreation and personality development for Jews." But, he hoped, "the leadership may, on the other hand, come to realize that the vitality of the movement depends on its retreat from neutrality; that its service to the Jewish community depends on a more definitive program."⁷

⁵ Sanford Solender, *The Jewish Community Center and the American Jewish Future*. New York: National Jewish Welfare Board, 1965, p. 4.

⁶ *Future Directions of American Jewish Life and Their Implications for Jewish Community Centers*, Proceedings of Conference at Lakewood, New Jersey, January 6 to January 9, 1963. New York: National Association of Jewish Center Workers and JWB, p. 4.

⁷ Carl Urbont, "The Purposes of the Jewish Community Center Movement: An Appraisal of Their Operation," *American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 68. New York: The American Jewish Committee, and Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1967, p. 50.

The paramount question is whether the Center can retain its neutrality and still develop an ideology at the same time.

In 1945, the Executive Committee of JWB resolved "that a survey be undertaken of the National Jewish Welfare Board to guide it in the development of a post-war program of Jewish Center work; to inquire into the relationships of JWB with its constituent Centers and to the community." This led to the landmark study more usually referred to as the Janowsky Report.⁸ It resulted in the formulation of a Statement on Principles on Jewish Center Purposes adopted by the Annual Meeting of the National Council of JWB on May 9, 1948.

Some of these principles have by now been well worn, often more from discussion than from implementation. We mention them again: "Jewish content is fundamental to the program of the Jewish Center . . . The Jewish Center should fulfill its Jewish purpose . . . The functions of the Jewish Center include: (a) service as an agency of Jewish identification; (b) service as a common meeting ground for all Jews; (c) service as an agency of personality development; (d) furtherance of the democratic way of life; (e) assistance in the integration of the individual Jew, as well as of the Jewish group.

All of this took place 34 years ago. It caused an uproar in the field and debates which went on for over two decades. Some of it had to do with attempts to define Jewish content, but most of the controversy was prompted by fears that particular philosophies in Jewish life would be imposed or that stressing the Jewishness of the Center would in itself be a particularity that would be counter to American democracy.

In the mid and late '60s that furor

began to abate as those who were opposed to the Statement of Principles left for other fields. But those of us who were left did not come up with an in-depth program of how to implement or define Jewish content. The fear that a particular Jewish philosophy might predominate, depending upon who the workers or the Board members were, was one source of paralysis. That it would shatter the unique pivotal neutral position of the Center was another. There were others, such as simply a lack of Jewish knowledge among workers with outstanding group work skills whose ability to work with people could easily have made their programs rich with Jewishness.

Where are we in the present on the Jewishness of the Center as we look into the future? I believe that the Jewish community is at a balance point in its survival and needs a Center that will reach out to it vigorously and increasingly to help that community survive.

Perhaps everyone will be more receptive now than when Urbont wrote in 1967 that "For the country as a whole, it may be generalized that there is neither a marked tendency to resist Jewish tradition nor an active program to propagate it."⁹ In 1981, Jonathan Woocher, describing the findings of leadership development programs for emerging leaders in their mid-thirties, conducted by the Council of Jewish Federations and United Jewish Appeal, concluded that "what these young leaders appear to desire is an organized Jewish community which is genuinely devoted to promoting the security and welfare of all Jews and to the continuity of the Jewish tradition."¹⁰

Then let us look to the future to see

⁸ Urbont, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

¹⁰ Johathan S. Woocher, "Jewish Survivalism as Communal Ideology: An Empirical Assessment", *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. LVII, No. 4 (Summer, 1981), p. 296.

⁸ Oscar I. Janowsky, *The JWB Report*. New York: The Dial Press, 1948.

where the past has led us and how we should venture into the unknown.

1. *The Neutral Stance and the Development of a Jewish Ideology*

The Center should continue to retain the strength of its neutral stance as a common meeting ground for the Jewish community, but it must go beyond this to develop an ideological Jewish base. This sounds contradictory but it need not be. Ideology, says The Random House Dictionary, is: "1. the body of doctrine, myth, symbol, etc. of social movement, institution, class or large group; 2. such a body of doctrine, myth, etc. with reference to some political, cultural plan, along with the devices for putting it into operation."

The ideological Jewish base will not be the adoption of an existing Jewish ideology—religious, political or secular—for to do so would cause us to lose the opportunity to attract those who did not wish to make an *a priori* commitment in order to join, and it would put us in direct competition with the other ideologies.

The ideology will be to create a mass base of Jewish education for the Center's own members and the community-at-large. Members will still have the option of belonging to the Center and will be free to choose whether they wish to enroll in this popular school of Jewish studies. The school would offer classes and courses in Jewish history, ideas, culture, language, weekend retreats, Shabbatons and comparative Jewish religion.

At a similar time of assimilation and apathy, Franz Rosenzweig established the Free Jewish Academy or *Lehrhaus* in Frankfurt after World War I, "a college of instruction for Jews who, like himself, had moved away from their traditional faith and who now sought to return."¹¹

The Center would seek out the most gifted instructors and charismatic teachers in the community regardless of which Jewish educational institution they are teaching in. Liaisons would be established with departments of Judaica studies in the local universities. Some courses could lead to a college degree in Jewish studies. Most would be non-degree courses.

Such a school should have the widest possible mass base. It should be planned in conjunction not only with institutions of higher education, but with the Federation and the synagogues. It will likely need special Federation support.

In addition, the Center field through JWB, should begin to compile all the experiences it has had in attempting Jewish programming and education in both informal and formal groups and camping. This compilation, plus what comes out of the school of Jewish studies, would constitute the beginnings of texts for the field of practice.

Centers have done a remarkable job since their beginnings in creating an institution where social bonding takes place. This social bonding was further aided by the development, insights and practice of social group work, a specialized methodology within the field of social work, which Centers helped shape.

In the openness of free discussion and open social climate fostered by group work, and under the stimulus of the Janowsky Report, Centers began to introduce or amplify programs with Jewish content—holiday celebrations, Onegei Shabbat; informal courses in history, Hebrew language, bible; Jewish theatre, art (and the continuing debate if there is such a thing as Jewish art), dance with Jewish themes; poetry-reading; forums and lectures, bible

¹¹ Howard M. Sachar, *The Course of Modern*

Jewish History. Cleveland, The World Publishing Company, 1958, p. 414.

study; discussion of rituals; courses in Jewish cooking; book discussions; courses in history and Hebrew calligraphy; travelling exhibits; Israeli folk dance; Chanukah torch relay; study of the Yiddish language; the innovative "Quiz Cube." Happily, the list today of imaginative programs being offered is far longer than it was even a decade ago.

In addition then, to its social bonding (the peoplehood) function, its provision of a variety of services, and its growing provision of Jewish programs, the Center should create a formal school of generic Jewish studies in its next step of evolution as a Jewish communal institution.

When he was a boy in Brownsville, said David Hartman, the local Jewish community center (the Hebrew Education Society of Brooklyn) was "a bridge enabling Jewish ethnic particularity to find ways in which it could relate and integrate itself within the larger framework of American culture. Today the primary thrust has to be acculturation into a particular community called Jewish history and Jewish peoplehood."¹²

2. *The Building Programs and Focus for the Community*

It is no accident that Center and Y buildings are still being built and growing in size. Community needs and interests that can best be met by Centers have proliferated. More and better space is required to meet those needs. A building by itself means nothing, unless it is a better tool through which the staff can do their job and the Board can meet the community's needs.

Of course, deciding where to build a building today is a breath-holding job. The buildings are bigger and more ex-

pensive. A wrong analysis as to where the community will stabilize can be disastrous. Raising the funds for our new giant buildings vacuums up the time of the executive director and the resources of the board and community tremendously.

Besides the reasons already given, our new buildings provide a focus for the community, especially for our amorphous suburban communities where there is too often no focused core or leadership. But even the largest Center buildings today cannot serve the total Jewish population in the community in one site, especially in view of the spread of suburbia, where so many Jews today live. The main building will therefore provide the central core of Center services and it will be supplemented by satellite programs in other buildings, such as synagogues and schools.

3. *Jewish Community Campus and Multi-Services*

Where possible, Jewish community centers will acquire sites large enough to create Jewish community campuses on them, on which other Jewish agencies will provide their own services and Jewish communal organizations will have their offices. Such campuses will provide an even greater focus for the Jewish community. For some agencies, this kind of future is already here, agencies such as those in Washington, D.C., St. Louis and Commack, Long Island.

4. *The Ingathering of the Alienated and Unaffiliated*

Estimates about the extent of the unaffiliated vary, of course, from one community to another. In Manhattan it has been estimated at 75-85%. In Long Island, a suburban area, estimates run according to locale, from 50%-80%. My definition of unaffiliated is someone

¹² David Hartman, "The Role of the Jewish Community Center", Address made at JWB Biennial, Montreal, Canada, 1978, Unpublished.

who is not affiliated with any Jewish organization. If that person joins a Center, he or she has become affiliated with the Jewish community. The term "unaffiliated" has too long been associated only with synagogue affiliation.

It should be the future task of Centers to organize a determined effort to reach the unaffiliated and the alienated, who may be one and the same. This should be done in conjunction with other entities in the community. The neutral non-threatening stance of the Center can be most valuable in this effort of the ingathering of the alienated and the unaffiliated. If the cults supposedly attract their adherents with warmth, love and ideas, can we not convey that same message?

5. *Reversing the "No-Win" Situation for the Jewish Community*

There is room for optimism in that there is still a Jewish community. But there is no lack of pessimism as we watch it diminish. Can we define a role for the Center in the future in helping the Jewish community remain viable? I see the Jewish community in a "no-win" situation with population declines decimating one community after another in the next quarter century. We are all familiar with the causes of this decline: a staggering divorce rate, a low birth rate that is not replacing the current population, and a very high inter-marriage rate.

I do not know how many Jews a community needs for it to survive with a rich communal life, except to say that the more the better. Among the current reactions to the ongoing and future losses is the view that quality is more important than quantity. This is already a retreat to the second line of defense; where does the retreat stop? An alternative approach is to respond with vigor to stem any retreat.

From its neutral non-denominational stance can the Center take a more assertive role in working with the intermarried, in helping them raise their children Jewishly, and in fostering conversion of the non-Jewish spouse or children? We recognize how sensitive the issue is, but can we overlook dealing with it?

Our work with teens and young adults needs more imaginative programming and workers who can work with these age groups. Our record of working with these two categories of membership is weakest of all. Day care centers for the working Jewish mother need to be expanded.

There are undoubtedly other strategies the Center can take, but we must, by ourselves and with other organizations, begin to address the no-win condition we are in.

6. *The Wheel of Community Organization*

It may customarily be felt that Federations do Jewish community organization and that Centers provide a functional service. As with other neat definitions of the past, such as the division of labor in fund-raising, the lines of demarcation are becoming blurred.

Centers will have an increasing role to play in community organization on a local functional level, for example, with Jewish community councils (which are either created by the Center or arise spontaneously) or with less formal arrangements. The Long Island suburban experience is beginning to show the value of community councils in attempting to create a sense of community.

The Center has been described as a bridge of various kinds. Sometimes it is a bridge between cultures or a bridge between past and future. At most times it is a bridge between organizations. The

truer state of affairs is that it is many bridges at any given time. A more apt description is that the Center is akin to the hub of a wheel, with the spokes as bridges, meeting at the rim to form an encompassed community of functional organizations.

The existing current programs of Centers can be characterized as the internal program and community organization as the external program. It is recognized that the external program will be secondary to the primary internal program but this external program will become part of the definition of the future.

7. Relationships Between Federation and a Membership Organization

Increasingly the Center will become a partner with Federation in achieving community objectives. Centers have bridled at being described as the instruments of Federation. Adversary relationships, to the extent that they existed, will, or at least should, diminish. Centers provide great visibility for Federation. Neither the Center nor Federation by themselves alone can achieve the goals of the future.

A Center is primarily a membership organization and most of its income comes from the fees and dues of its members. Some of the programs posited here for the Center of the future are broad-based community programs which are beyond the capacity of the Center to fund by itself. If some of these are to be achieved, then outside sources of funding such as the Federation and endowments will be essential.

8. Some Final Observations

The community's agenda is a long one. The Center can be a logical instru-

ment to tackle many of the community's needs, but it need not, and cannot do everything.

I would like to wind up with some brief observations not yet touched upon. The Center will need to engage increasingly in leadership development—to develop leaders for itself, Federation and other organizations, including non-Jewish organizations such as the United Way. Leadership is the key to how well organizations, industry, communities and countries function.

What about staff and the professional disciplines? There are many disciplines today in our Centers. One of the major disciplines has been group work. I still believe it should continue to be a major discipline, because of its effectiveness in helping people develop their personality and achieve self-fulfillment through group experience. But I see many of today's group workers coming out with a major orientation in group therapy. This is not the skill we need in serving the body of our membership. I would not like to see the Center of the future lose the profession of group work, which it helped to shape from the beginning.

There is a need for concern about the role, or perhaps more properly, the job description, of the executive director as chief operating officer. He or she is required to know and be skilled in everything, it would seem.

As the buildings have grown, the job has grown enormously, but often without the backup in staff or funds that would alleviate the burden. The personnel changes that have taken place in our small group of executives attest to the size of the burdens. The Center will move into the future in direct proportion to how much time the executive can devote to the elements of such a move, and how strong the board is.

Summary

The Center movement started with small literary organizations designed to meet social and intellectual needs. These organizations evolved into building-centered institutions serving the whole community. The definition of a community center given earlier in the paper can stand for the future but the emphasis will shift towards the development of an ideology providing a generic base for mass Jewish education. The Center will maintain its traditionally "neutral"—that is, non-denominational—stance, with the neutrality providing the opportunity to reach the broadest spectrum of the community.

Centers will increasingly take on broader community tasks. Buildings will be bigger and will become a focus for the community, particularly in helping to build a coherent core in suburban communities. Where possible, Centers will create a Jewish community campus where other Jewish organizations will be housed. Centers will provide a leading thrust in reaching out to the alienated and the unaffiliated and become a bridge between these groups and other Jewish organizations.

The Center will be the hub of a wheel as it increasingly links up with other organizations to create a sense of community in new areas of settlement. Centers will play a role in attempting to reverse the "no-win," "no future" condition of the Jewish community through special programs and approaches. Centers will participate in and promote community

organization on a functional level. They will form stronger partnerships with Federation to achieve common Jewish objectives.

Centers will increasingly and consciously develop leaders for the Jewish, and to some extent, the general, community. The profession of social group work will need to be re-examined and distinguished from group therapy if it is to serve as a major discipline in working with the great majority of Center members.

The roles of the executive director and of the board will become ever more complex as they attempt to achieve more. The Center will continue to grow in importance in the community as it takes on additional community tasks and needs. The Center can and will be a vital institution in helping the Jewish community survive, numerically and creatively. We embrace many demands of the future with trepidation but also with excitement.

Additional Readings

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