

A Responsa Literature for Jewish Communal Practice

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The beginnings of the development of a Jewish communal service responsa literature or one more specifically related to Jewish community center practices has all the variables in place. The Jewish issues continuously appear on countless agendas. The institutions within which these "Jewish activities" take place are bona fide and respectable agencies of the Jewish community.

“**M**OSES received the *Torah* at Sinai and handed it down to Joshua; Joshua to the Elders; the Elders to the Prophets; and the Prophets handed it down to the Men of the Great Assembly.”* The Great Assembly functioned during and after the Persian Period in Jewish history, between 500 and 300 years before the Common Era. Over the ensuing 2300 years *Torah* was passed from generation to generation, and at some time in the 20th century it was handed down, or should have been handed down, to executive directors, presidents, boards and committees of Jewish community centers and other communal agencies of the Jewish community. Whether it was consciously accepted is not too clear. However it is definitely clear that Jewish community centers and other Jewish communal agencies have become vital and vibrant institutions for the sustaining, enactment, and transference of the expressions of Jews and of the evolution of Jewish practices.

To justify assertion of the importance of Jewish community centers to Jews in this country we need only cite the fact that the aggregate Center membership now exceeds one million, Jews from three-year-olds in pre-school programs to Jews 93 or more years-old in programs for the elderly. To justify the statement that Centers are vital institu-

tions for sustaining and transferring Jewish practices we need only take note of the many “Jewish” programs and experiences enjoyed by Jews in Centers—the celebration of holidays, the formal and informal Jewish education programs, the performance and exhibition of Jewish art forms, the programs that take place on Shabbat, the application of *Kashrut*, the strengthening of family relationships, the programs expressing concerns to fellow Jews wherever they may be, the support of *Tzedakah* and fund-raising efforts for the welfare of the Jewish community, the making of Jewish artifacts such as *Sukkot*, *Hanukiot*, *Matzah*, and much more. No doubt similar statements can be made about other Jewish communal agencies.

Much of the Jewish things we do are not in accordance with the way they were prescribed or commanded to us at Sinai, and for that matter neither are they in accordance with the way they were interpreted and set into law by the sages of the Great Assembly. Therefore, it is appropriate to raise the question of who in our agencies are deciding how to interpret and put into practice all the Jewish things we do. What guidelines do we use to determine how to choose and suggest Jewish practices and behavior.

Throughout Jewish history the evolution of Jewish practices and the behavior of Jews have been guided and determined by the framework that was acceptable to the people of the time. As

* Pirkei Avot, 1:1.

already stated, tradition has it that it began at Sinai and was passed down eventually to the men of the Great Assembly. From there in each generation and in the different places where Jews resided, authoritative structures were set up to interpret the application of Jewish law and the regulations for Jewish behavior. There were the Sanhedrin, the great academies of Babylonia and Persia, the Geonim, the Yeshivot of Europe and the Mediterranean basin, and the authority which communities granted to the great teachers of their time. There were linkages and communications among the institutions which existed throughout the Jewish world and with the sages who lived in different lands. New reasoning always referred to what came from Sinai and leaned heavily upon how it evolved during the preceding generations. The conditions of the immediate present at any given period of time were also a factor in the rendering of judgments and opinions. Within this system a responsa literature was developed over the centuries whereby questions governing the lives of Jews were posed and answers by eminent rabbis or groups of rabbis were considered and then recorded in written decisions. A body of literature dealing with just about every aspect of behavior, philosophy, values and law was developed which provided the guidelines for Jewish thought and behavior to the present day.

While in many places this system did not have the power of enforcement behind it, in most places restraints for non-conformity were strong enough to ensure acceptance and performance by most Jews. In recent times, particularly here in North America, Jewish behavior and thought took on a much freer form and people now pick and choose as they wish. The "community" has very little to say about what is legitimate, acceptable, or binding. While it may very well have

been the case that the masses of Jews were never extremely knowledgeable about Jewish law and thought, the vast majority of them constantly conformed to the edicts and directions which were dictated by tradition or the interpretation of the times. In the present day it again can be said that the masses are not knowledgeable, but in a departure from the past, today, tradition and interpretation have much less influence upon what Jews now do or think.

Today's institutions which influence Jewish acts are the synagogue and the rabbis, the Federations and organizations, political conditions, Israel, the Jewish schools and the Jewish community centers, and the social surroundings within which Jews live. Of course, there are other forces at play but my purpose is not to analyze what goes into the making of modern day Jewish man. The purpose is to focus upon just one of these forces—Jewish communal service, and more specifically one of these institutions, the Jewish community center. The intent is to suggest the commencement of a discussion of whether or not the Center, as it impacts upon Jewish action, does so within or outside the framework of the evolution of Jewish behavior and thinking. At the same time some of what follows may be relevant to other institutions of Jewish communal service and thereby suggest that a similar process can be extended to include everyone within the professional Jewish communal field.

As an action and activity oriented agency, the Jewish community center influences and changes people's lives more by what it does than by what it says. The activities it conducts and the ground rules set for conducting these programs are in themselves statements of what the Center, its staff and lay decision-makers suggest to people as wholesome, legitimate, and purposeful activities for them to pursue and enjoy

and which will add enrichment, pleasure and understanding to their lives. These activities in some measure shape the lives of those who participate in them. They influence the immediate environment in which they are conducted, and they add new dimensions to the feeling, thinking, and doing within the wider community.

Therefore, the Center, by the kinds of Jewish programs it conducts continuously makes statements on many Jewish issues and thereby affects the lives of Jews and the involvement of Jewish group life. The ground rules it sets for these programs, the foci of these programs, and the atmosphere it generates through these programs define how these issues should be treated and resolved. If Centers in fact do this, and I think they do, there should be the desire and the need to take a look at the framework and rationale within which all of these things get to be done.

Our professional literature which deals with "Jewish things" primarily focuses upon the state of the Jewish people, the conditions of the Jewish community, the accomplishments and the voids of Jewish institutions, and the program services of Jewish agencies. The goal statements of Jewish agencies refer to serving the Jewish needy, the sick, and the emotionally disturbed. They contain references to helping Jews live creative Jewish lives, encouraging Jews to acquire a knowledge and an appreciation of Jewish ethical and cultural values, and strengthening identification with the Jewish people and Israel. Both the literature and the goal statements are commentaries and reflections upon why we should do specific things. They make references to aspirations for performance by either the agency, the decision-makers or the members. There does not appear to be much in writing to detail the thought or decision-making processes which reflect the Jewish

guidelines or the Jewish references used by agencies in determining and constructing their services and programs.

It is very possible that Jewish service agencies, and to be more specific Jewish community centers, through the things they do or don't do are making adaptations to Jewish practices, redoing Jewish definitions, and prescribing new forms of Jewish behavior. In excess of 50 percent of Jewish Centers are now open on Shabbat. Through the various types of programs they conduct on Shabbat they may in effect be proclaiming the legitimacy of Jews engaging in these types of activities on this day. The people whom Centers accept into their membership and include as Jews into their statistics may very well be influencing the definition of who is a Jew. Being open on Shabbat or closed on Pesach, Shavuout, or Sukkot in some way may be a declaration of the relative importance of these Jewish holy days and holidays. The degree to which Kashrut is or is not practiced where food service is a necessary function may influence community mores and may be more than just an expression of accommodation to one or more groups within the Jewish community. Nude swimming, family life programs, the way scholarship funds are granted, the welcoming of a new resident to town are all issues and programs which are part of Center operations and which have reference to the fabric of Jewish living, Jewish values, and Jewish deeds.

However, just what is the frame of reference used by Centers to develop a rationale for how to treat these and other issues and to then integrate them into their service patterns and work style? Are the determinants which lead to the decision to open the building on Shabbat drawn from the understanding of Shabbat within Jewish law, philosophy, and tradition or is the decision a result of an elaboration of the

theory for use of leisure time and of the sociological phenomenon that on this day many have a great amount of free time? Is Shabbat viewed as a convenient accommodation to the pleasure-seeking desires of people or is its observance in a particular way more related to the dignity of man, to how one views one's self living in a world with others, and to the mark of distinction which supports the continuation of the Jewish people? To what extent are all the activities prescribed by the Center on the Shabbat designed to occupy one's leisure time in a wholesome manner and to what extent are they extensions of both the philosophical and traditional role which Shabbat has played in the lives of Jews and the Jewish people?

The intent in raising these questions is not to suggest proposing specific answers nor to pass judgment on what is being done or why it is done. Neither is Shabbat the only issue, although it is a prominent one. The purpose is to reemphasize the suggestion that as in the case of Shabbat, Centers and other Jewish communal agencies and organizations are making public pronouncements on what they presently deem as being legitimate activities in which Jews should and may participate. The purpose is to question further whether all the Jewish things which are being done within the Jewish community and by a Jewish agency are being implemented and encouraged for the benefit of individual people who happen to be Jews or whether they are being done in keeping with Jewish tradition and thought for the ultimate continuation and benefit of the Jewish people.

All of us foster the appreciation and observance of Jewish values and traditions to strengthen and develop Jewish identity and thereby contribute to Jewish group survival. We emphasize Jewish education, synagogue affiliation, holiday celebrations, wholesome family

living, financial support of Jewish institutions, allegiance to Israel, reading Jewish literature and appreciating Jewish art. We stress the Jewish content and the Jewish component of our personal lives, and of our agencies' work. We do these things because they add to a deeper understanding of where we came from and knowing this provides for a more comfortable acceptance of ourselves and of who we are. This gives us a sense of strength and togetherness to determine how best to sustain ourselves into the future.

Jewish content, Jewish education, and a Jewish ambiance are certainly important factors to be included in our programs. The encouragement for Jews to participate in many Jewish institutions, enjoy Jewish events, and enrich their lives with the appreciation of Jewish art forms are also important. However, the nature and substance of this content, the guidelines which are used to define the specific design of a program, and the clear enunciation of the goals to be achieved are distinguishing variables which determine whether they are within or without the parameters of Jewish thought and Jewish act. Doing things for Jews, and even doing things under Jewish labels may in itself be for the benefit of the Jewish people, but unless we take a look at the basic Jewish value or Jewish prescription for what is being done, we may not be advancing or changing both the act and the value. To assume that as long as it has a Jewish label or to blandly say it is an expression of something identifiable or of value to the Jewish people may not be sufficient reason for launching a particular program unless we understand, in Jewish terms, the elements for its origin, the manner in which it was expressed over the years, the specific goals it was meant to achieve, and both the restraints and freedom allowed to us within Jewish history and tradition.

Our frame of reference to determine the rationale for a Jewish program or service has in many instances been that we considered it to be something of "Jewish tradition" or a thoughtful Jewish response to the stated needs and interest of the people who use our institutions. Until recent times Shabbat was the time for people to attend synagogues and not to perform "work" and therefore most of our Centers were closed. *Kashrut* separates meat from dairy products and defines permissible and non-permissible foods to eat. As long as we made provisions to adhere to these rules and made provisions for those who abided by them we saw ourselves as being accommodating to the entire Jewish community. If people do not tell us they are not Jewish we assume that they are, or if they had a non-Jewish sounding name we assume that they are not. Jews always help the poor and we respond to the needs of these people by devising sliding scales under the principle that people should pay as much as they can afford for the service, but this principle is not applied to everyone. Reaching out to the newcomer is important both to him and to the maintenance of the Jewish community but in most instances it rests with the newcomer to come forward and either proclaim himself or request the service.

The tenor of the time has now changed. The Jewish condition has undergone and is still undergoing change and the Jewish community agenda are calling for a clearer understanding of the Jewish motivations for the services provided by Jewish agencies. We are more comfortable about who we are. At the same time we are more concerned about who we want to be, and are more aware of what it will take to be that type of Jewish person or Jewish group. We are knowledgeable about how to go about shaping the

forces which will strengthen our continued Jewish existence. We should therefore be ready to take a look at what we say we are doing, not only by what and how we do these things but also about the depth and relevance they have to Jewish continuity and the evolving Jewish civilization which we influence.

Background information and knowledge of Jewish thought, history, and law are certainly necessary for any in-depth discussion on these issues. Inclusion of rabbis, Jewish educators, and other authorities in Jewish life will certainly be required. However, it is the Center practitioner, the executive and line worker, the boards and committees, who wrestle with these issues daily. They are deeply committed to the enrichment and perpetuation of Jewish peoplehood, they have knowledge in their own right, and they ultimately respond to the Jewish aspirations of the people who flock to their institutions. The methodology of in-depth inquiry into the many institutional, social, human, and Jewish issues is well known to them and effectively practiced by them. They know whom to involve and how to involve the appropriate consultants in all phases of their Center operation. In addition to having the experience of initiating program services which fulfill many Jewish needs they understand from their cumulative historical perspectives the effect which these services have upon the lives of the participants. In the final analysis, it is the staff and the lay leadership who deliberate issues and ultimately decide on what to do and how to do it.

The beginnings of the development of a Jewish communal service response literature or one more specifically related to Jewish community center practices has all the variables in place. The Jewish issues continuously appear on countless agendas. The institutions within which these "Jewish activities"

take place are *bona fide* and respectable agencies of the Jewish community. The professional staffs are knowledgeable and competent to speak from a frame of reference of their area of specialization and their Jewish work experience. Consultants from other Jewish disciplines are available. It simply is necessary to come to a state of willingness to study Jewish issues, not only in sociological and political terms, but also in Jewish terms.

Recognizing that we may be beginning a process which is somewhat strange to us, a process in which many may feel inadequate although they have all the required tools and insights not to feel this way, we can start with those programs which are clearly identifiable and which embody Jewish practices, values and issues. Jewish *responsa* literature in essence is a system of posing questions and searching for answers within the continuum of Jewish custom, law, and tradition. It focuses upon day-to-day practice issues as they take form in the contemporary living situation. Therefore, in developing the policies and guidelines for why and how these programs are to be conducted, we should include the Jewish rationale and the Jewish reference which gives meaning, purpose, and justification to them. We should feel free to share this with our colleagues and with others who are equally concerned with Jewish communal practice, and we should welcome their response and reactions.

It may make sense for the professional association, be it the association related to a particular field of practice or the overall umbrella association, to set up a "responsa" committee or study group to respond and react to presentations made to them. This journal can be the vehicle for an exchange of such thinking. Whatever system one chooses to use or which is set up, it should be with the understanding of a purpose to encourage inquiry and search for the Jewish dimension which will justify a program or service as a legitimate expression or answer to a Jewish issue within the context of Jewish thought and tradition. Whatever evolves from such an exchange cannot be considered to be binding upon the inquirer nor grant authority to the respondent. It should be viewed as a way to apply further professional knowledge and skill within the Jewish arena in which we all work, and to add clarity and direction to the Jewish growth of the Jewish people.

This is a task for Jewish communal workers working in Jewish communal agencies and not one to be referred to others for commentary and judgment. Others should certainly be included in this task—rabbis, scholars, lay leaders—but in a spirit of dialogue and a desire to search for workable answers. To paraphrase Rabbi Tarfon, the task may be demanding, we may all be a bit lazy, but the reward is great and the Master is insistent.