

## BEING JEWISH AS A LEISURE-TIME ACTIVITY

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Jews in the United States are in a place and time where being Jewish is easy. They have freedom, security, and financial success on a scale that no previous Jewish community has experienced. Indeed, as a very consequence of the nature of American society, Judaism has become part of the culture. The shared understanding that underscores the commercial success of pizza bagels or Hebrew National Franks "answering to a higher authority" and the cross-cultural use of such terms as Kosher, *meshuganah*, and *shlep* point to an acceptance of our people and our ways that makes it easier than ever to be Jewish in the United States.

The flip side of how easy it is to be Jewish, of course, is how easy it is not to be Jewish. Traditionally, identity was ascribed to an individual at birth and then developed throughout the lifetime by being immersed in the community. The system controlled people's actions, environment, and roles, and membership was involuntary, much like belonging to a family. Today, although Jewish identity may be conferred at birth, it no longer suffices for many (Linzer, 1996). Identifying and affiliating have become completely voluntary, and we are as free to choose our identity as we are to choose our occupation, education, and spouse (Eisen, 1997). We are also free to join and leave the community when we choose, and identities can be changed as quickly and easily as one's clothing. If affluence, accent, and affect can transcend religion in contemporary American society, then we have all become Jews by choice; and if identity requires an act of choice, then research has shown that many assimilated and unaffiliated Jews have chosen not to belong (Linzer, 1996).

If being Jewish is now a choice, rather

than a part of what we have to do, it makes sense to look at it as a leisure-time activity. When we do so, we realize that it competes for time in our busy lives with television, sports, movies, shopping, and vacations. Or the time we spend "being Jewish" can also be referred to as default time—meaning, it is often a second-choice activity that one backs into when forced to or when there is nothing better to do. Even those of us whose identities are immersed in a Jewish profession experience *default-time* Judaism, as exemplified by almost anything related to or responding to anti-Semitism, and perhaps even by personnel codes that close our institutions on Jewish holidays. When we attend services only if we are invited to a Bar Mitzvah, when we go to Israel only with the generous travel subsidies of most missions, educational seminars, or summer teen trips, and when we choose Jewish day schools only after we have rejected public school as too dangerous and private school as too expensive, we are choosing our identification by default.

Our challenge is to look at the leisure and default-time choices that people are making, recognize that being Jewish is an elective experience, and find ways to draw individuals to the institutions of Jewish life. Jewish Community Centers (JCCs) have the special potential to turn leisure time into an unique and important opportunity for Jewish community building and Jewish identity formation. JCCs say, "Spend your leisure time with us and you will become a better person as you do more Jewish things with more Jewish friends." Community is created by common experiences, and what people choose to do in their leisure time can create a community.

JCCs must examine the other places, such as amusement parks, restaurants, movie theaters, and malls, that solicit and receive our leisure time for insights on how to improve their effectiveness. Some of the shared characteristics of these places are that they are

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busiest on weekends and holidays, they are staffed largely by part-time employees, especially individuals who are personable and enthusiastic, and they are unfailingly optimistic and contemporary. In addition, many of these businesses have recognized that "Generation X" members do not have the same interests as their parents and have carved their market niche accordingly. It is no different for the Jewish Generation X. For example, while Israel might not be the chief concern of this generation, the environment is certainly a big issue. JCCs can respond to the greening of Jewish America with appropriate programs and policies that will interest and excite a new influx of membership. JCC resident camps may be the perfect sites to offer environmental policy forums and seminars and Judaism-based nature and wildlife retreats.

In addition to looking at the competition, JCCs must look at their own history to recognize and evaluate where and why we have been successful. There is clear evidence of success when JCCs have anticipated the curve, an example of which can be found in the world of competitive sports. Unlike the sports leagues of BBYO that became unpopular as more and more Jewish students played on their high-school teams, the JCC Maccabi games were designed in such a way to enhance the high-school athletic programs. The music school at the JCC on the Palisades, New Jersey, is another fine example of how we have anticipated and responded to popular culture with programs that break our traditional "fun with music" clubs. Sophisticated instruction in music and dance, combined with good recital and performing opportunities, let this JCC program compete with the Julliard School of Music that is just across the George Washington Bridge.

JCCs can also take a lesson from popular news journals such as *Time* and *Newsweek*. Twice a year, at Easter and Christmas, they invariably feature articles about God. It is what their readers are thinking about and what their readers need and want right then. It is the time when many people find their way

(back) to religion, at least temporarily. In contrast, what are the JCCs doing in response to the same kind of emotional and spiritual attachment Jewish people have during the Jewish High Holy Days? Unfortunately, during the time when the highest number of unaffiliated Jews are looking to reconnect, JCCs are generally closed for business and miss this important opportunity for reconnection.

Unfortunately, most JCCs have become examples of a fixed organization, one that is "focused on the technology that created its greatness and on enhancing that which initially captured its market share" (Janov, 1994, p. 45). In 1970, Xerox dominated the copy machine market when it created its first dry paper copier. Because of the success of this product, Xerox dedicated itself to developing faster, bigger, and more expensive copiers. What it did not recognize was that the market had begun to shift and that customers' preferences had changed to smaller, less complicated machines that would be affordable for multiple locations within a building. Other companies who saw customers' needs and responded to them captured a huge market share, seriously jeopardizing Xerox's survival. Fortunately for Xerox, it recognized its fragile state and moved to make changes. By the mid-1980s its goals were to exceed customer requirements, and the company went so far as to engage customers in co-designing their equipment.

Like Xerox, we must move away from being a fixed organization. We must stop focusing inward and look instead toward our potential customers. We will then be able to see more clearly which activities create value and then focus our energies and resources accordingly.

As a fixed organization, we have prided ourselves on our successful preschools, and like Xerox, we duplicated that same JCC preschool as we have expanded. However, if we had been innovative in looking toward potential customers, the new preschools and new JCC facilities would include lounges for nursing mothers, baby changing tables in

men's and women's restrooms, mandatory parent education courses, and a more family-friendly atmosphere.

As we move away from being a fixed organization, we will be able to stop doing things exactly as we have done them in the past. As Albert Einstein said, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." One mistake that we have fallen into is that we strive to have all of our workers be career professionals, trained generically in the social work tradition, with supervision, management, human development, and planning skills. But is that a model that makes successful programming? Certainly, health and fitness managers are career professionals, but what about the many teachers and instructors we hire? Too much of our limited financial resources are spent on the benefits and salaries of career professionals. In music and art, we should simply hire the best people. These professionals do not have to nor do many want to work full-time or do administrative work. They will come in to do what they are best at, and their greatness will make the program exceptional, satisfying current customers and attracting new ones.

Every city has its own entertainment industry. For example, many local television, radio, and newspaper personalities are young employees at the beginning of their careers and, if Jewish, would probably work in a JCC on a part-time or project basis. They are the "up and comers" in their fields, and they have the potential to help us achieve exceptional programming. If we dedicate the funds to excellence of instruction, our programs and classes will be superior, there will be less need for career supervisors, and our resources will have been wisely spent.

It would be in our best interest to do a better scan of positions to determine which should be full time and career and which should be part time and/or seasonal. For a cultural arts program that has a limited season, it might be best to hire a part-time employee. The costs of benefits that would normally go to full-time staff in this position

could be diverted into funds committed to bringing in the best performers, who, in turn, would bring in the highest attendance. Of course, this evaluation will vary from Center to Center, and each JCC will need to review its position from its unique perspective.

We should also finally admit that most of the graduates of our programs in Jewish communal service are women, and for many of them, their careers will take breaks. Some of these staff are the brightest and most talented our field has to offer, and we frequently lose them because they cannot continue to handle the demanding workload when they decide to start a family. If we try to break the mold, to create job sharing that is project based, we might be able to keep these well-educated, highly motivated staff members. Their continuity with our agencies and their enhanced job and personal satisfaction will only help us achieve better programs.

Many JCCs have hidden behind their budgets. Boards and CEOs must recognize, however, that a budget is only a history of past financial activities. Though budgets are constraints, constraints can spawn invention (Janov, 1994). Therefore, we must find the courage to use resources in new ways and not take the easy way out by the conservative repetition of past practice. Instead of reprinting last year's catalog, JCCs need to take risks. JCCs should see what is out there and make sure to be on the "cutting edge." Even if the agency spends money and fails, it is good, because the JCC is trying and testing new ideas. JCCs must experiment every day, and be ready to chase good programs and learn not to repeat bad programs. In his thought-provoking article, "The End of Community," published in this *Journal* in 1996, David Dunkelman wrote that the Jewish community could be virtually eliminated by the middle of the twenty-first century if we continue to avoid novel ideas because they threaten the delicate equilibrium of how things are always done. To avoid this fate, JCCs that allow new ideas to be tested and fail will soon be in front of the curve, setting the trend and defining the spirit and breadth of a new

Jewish institutional community.

But what about the Jewish aspects of our work? What will differentiate the JCC from other businesses if we only create products? That is where training comes into play. Instead of more supervision, workers require more Jewish educational training that will help them understand how their programs fit into the continuity of Jewish life.

In the same way that American society, through its institutions and celebrations, can encourage recent immigrants to believe that their forefathers arrived on the Mayflower, we can shape an identity around the interests of this generation. There are Jewish role models to be found in every field, and we should form connections to them. Kerri Strug and Mitch Gaylord, among others, are Jews that can be heroes to our budding gymnasts. Teenagers who are fans of contemporary music groups such as Phish will be interested in exploring why the group's compact disc contains the song, "Yerushalayim shel Zahav." There are numerous *Parshot* that deal with sports, ethics, music, and art. A good Jewish educator can train program staff to make these vital connections. We will then have a phenomenal Jewish product that will appeal to our consumers and enhance Jewish continuity and community.

Leonard Fein (1997), the prominent Jewish journalist and publisher, decries a future of "competitive advantage, sales, marketing and product" as the "sinister first steps to our recasting of all human affairs to... the empo-

rium of the corporation." He concludes with the mournful observation that "the idea of freedom is incompatible with a world view that sees people as consumers rather than human beings." However, despite his glorious metaphors, it seems that he confused the strategies of engagement with the goals of engagement. We must identify and strengthen our institutional tools to achieve our communal goals. We must use our competitive advantages, which are our history and traditions, to create programs of excellence so that people will seek us out, rather than join us by default. A vital JCC will be both symptomatic and definitive in creating a new vibrant institutional Jewish community.

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