

ISSUES, CHALLENGES, AND PRIORITIES FACING COMMUNITIES AND JEWISH COMMUNAL PROFESSIONALS An Israeli Perspective

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Encouraging Israeli social service professionals to conceive of themselves as working within the context of a Jewish society and not only as Israeli society is one of the challenges facing the World Council. As Israeli professionals continue to explore how they can build and strengthen a Jewish state above and beyond the direct services they are providing for their clients, they will develop closer relationships with their Diaspora colleagues, and a true world Jewish community will be created.

This special issue of the *Journal* assumes that Jewish communal professionals in Israel work within Jewish communities in a similar way to their counterparts in other places around the Jewish world. This is not true. Perhaps, it is easier to say that Israel and the Diaspora communities deal with many of the same challenges and problems, but they approach them from very different perspectives.

Israel is a sovereign political state, and the Diaspora communities are private voluntary organizations. The state of Israel has specific responsibilities and obligations toward its citizens, and it is a political structure that has no choice but to provide the necessary services and care for its population. This is not a matter of choice; the state cannot decide whether or not it wants to provide basic services and the citizens have no choice as to whether or not they want to accept citizenship. In the world of the political state there is really no voluntary decision making as it applies to taxes and laws.

In contrast, in the voluntary community no taxes are imposed, and the financial base is determined by individuals and families who decide on the basis of free will and possible social pressure to make contributions. The staff of voluntary organizations in the Diaspora are by and large professionals who have decided to affiliate their professional activities with the Jewish community

and thus become part of the field of Jewish communal service.

Israeli professionals see their role quite differently from their Diaspora counterparts. Professionals are either employed by the national or municipal governments, work in voluntary organizations, or develop their own private business, i.e., consultation. They do not conceive of themselves as working for the Jewish community, and their conception of professional self is one of being public sector employees or employees of a voluntary organization. The professional social worker, administrator, project manager, and agency director in Israel identifies with his or her agency and profession and perhaps with the geographic region or municipality where the agency is located.

In the Diaspora, the context of Jewish communal service is the Jewish community. Yet, the Jewish community is not only an end in itself but is also a vehicle for the Jewish people to deal with issues concerning them. There is no overriding authority mandating the development of services for the problems they face, and many Jewish communities have elected to provide parallel services to those provided by the government and the general community. They have chosen to provide these parallel services because they believe that they can meet the specific and particular needs of their community—the Jewish community.

In Israel, the legislated services are provided to all citizens, and there is no process of developing unique services for the Jewish community. Although specific services may be tailored to the ultra-Orthodox community, these are not regular occurrences. Those modifications are made for that population's special needs and to enable them to feel more comfortable about receiving the services they are entitled to receive.

How can we expect people who work as professionals for a sovereign political state and who have a strong sense of their Israeli identity to perceive themselves as Jewish communal workers? How they begin to conceive of themselves as working within the context of a Jewish society and not only an Israeli society is one of the challenges facing the World Council in heading toward the twenty-first century.

During the second fifty years of Israel's life, the country must begin to come to terms with its Jewishness and then to translate this new conception into action through schools, community centers, and other social and human services. It is not enough for a Jewish state to be a political sovereign entity. We have achieved this during the first fifty years, and now we have to move to the second stage of our development.

It is not enough for Israel to assume prominence based solely on its existence; there must be something unique about the message that comes forth from Jerusalem: *Taze Torah M'Yerushalayim* (The Torah comes forth from Jerusalem). This Torah is broader than the

body of laws and refers to the meaning of being Jewish in a Jewish state and the meaning and nature of the Jewish community that is created in the Jewish State.

Once this process begins to unfold, human service professionals will begin to examine their roles in society and to envision their mission as being larger than serving the citizens of a political state. It will be imperative that they have a Jewish component to their professional roles and they look upon themselves as working with Jews in a Jewish state. The challenge is to raise the issue of how the professionals are assisting in the building and strengthening of a Jewish state beyond the direct services they are providing for their clients.

As a result of this searching, Israeli professionals will come closer to their colleagues in Jewish communities around the world. Now, when Israeli social workers, community center workers, and other similar professionals meet in professional forums, they have a lot in common with Diaspora professionals when the discussion focuses strictly on professional activities. However, when it broadens to include the larger issues facing the Jewish community, the gap widens.

When Israeli professionals continue to search for the Jewish component to their professional roles, we will begin to see the creation of a world Jewish community and the meaning of a World Council on Jewish Communal Service will be very different. I trust that this process will yield different results for the next Quadrennial Meeting.