

## Another Look at the Open Membership Policy of Jewish Community Centers

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It seems appropriate to review the status of the open membership policy which remains the prevailing practice among Jewish community centers. In a series of articles in *The Reconstructionist*,<sup>1</sup> Oscar Janowsky suggests that the Jewish community centers have indeed become much more Jewish in their programs, in the degree of Jewish knowledge and commitment of their staffs, and in the image they present to the Jewish community. He laments the failure of most Jewish community centers to adopt a membership policy which strongly favors Jewish affiliation and discourages non-Jewish membership. He suggests a policy of membership for Jews with participation rights for non-Jews. In substance, this would continue the present practice of Jewish community centers, except that it would make non-Jews ineligible to vote at annual meetings, to serve on committees of the Board of Directors, and to serve on the Board of Directors itself. It would certainly be a more forceful way of emphasizing the Jewish purpose of the agency and whom the agency regards as its primary constituency. A very substantial reason for reviewing the state of events is that such an analysis is long overdue and there appears to

be almost nothing written in the recent literature on this subject.<sup>2</sup>

A survey questionnaire was disseminated to 50 Centers throughout the United States, outside of the New York Metropolitan area, which constituted a very representative sample of Jewish community centers by size of city and size of population. The results of this survey are of interest.

Of 46 Centers responding, 26 responded that they saw an increase in the trend toward non-Jewish affiliation, whereas 15 saw no increase in trend, and only 5 reported a trend toward a decline in non-Jewish participation. Of the 46 Centers studied, 9 have non-Jewish memberships of 30 percent, up to a maximum of 45 to 50 percent. Eleven Centers have a non-Jewish membership of between 20 and 29 percent. Eleven Centers have a non-Jewish membership between 10 and 19 percent, and the balance have non-Jewish memberships of less than 10 percent.

Almost all Centers responded that scholarships for memberships, day camps, nursery schools and resident camps are given to Jewish persons in far greater frequency than they are given to non-Jews. 38 Centers reported in this vein, 6 indicated that scholarships were given proportionate to membership enrollment, and 2 felt that non-Jews were receiving a disproportionate number of scholarships.

<sup>2</sup> George Korobkin, "The Economic and Philosophical Issues of Open Membership—a Dream Turned Sour," unpublished mimeograph, 1976.

In response to the question, "Is participation proportionate to membership affiliation?" 19 Centers responded that the proportion of non-Jews participating was higher than their percentage in the Center membership. 20 Centers reported that participation was proportionate, and 5 Centers felt that participation of non-Jews was disproportionately low.

In response to the question, "Do you feel there is a problem in non-Jewish membership in the Jewish Community Centers insofar as it adversely affects your ability to carry out the Jewish purposes of the agency?" 9 Centers responded in the affirmative, 28 Centers responded definitely not, and 10 Centers responded that they were uncertain.

Center directors were then asked to reply as to whether any kind of policy had been instituted to encourage Jewish membership. 29 Centers responded that they had and 17 Centers responded that they had not. The usual definition of a policy to influence Jewish membership was to "increase the amount of Jewish content programming."

In response to the question, "Has your agency established any policy intended to limit non-Jewish membership affiliation?" 13 Centers responded that they had, whereas 32 responded that they had not. Of this latter group, 2 were somewhat ambivalent in their response. Here again increasing Jewish programming was seen as limiting non-Jewish membership.

It would appear, therefore, that non-Jewish membership in the Jewish community centers is a significant phenomenon and is deserving of the most careful consideration from a variety of perspectives. It seems somewhat strange to the writer that Centers who reported non-Jewish memberships of 20 to 40 percent did not feel that this kind of membership mix constituted a problem in achieving the Jewish purposes of the agency. In part, the old stereotyped notion, perhaps true, that non-Jewish participation is essentially limited to the physical education area seems to be the most common refuge that Jewish purpose can remain intact while non-Jewish membership

and non-Jewish participation can expand. This certainly is a significant way of defining what we think of the physical education program from a Jewish point of view. It also assumes that there is no impact on the general program from what goes on in the physical education program. Perhaps this is indeed true and, if so, it tells a story in itself.

There does not appear to be any historical information against which we can compare these findings to see what trends have occurred over time. However, it is fair to make some general observations about what seems to be occurring. The physical expansion of the Jewish community centers and the suburbanization of the white middle class both serve to increase the potential and probably the reality of a somewhat less homogeneous Jewish area than had existed. This is certainly true once one discounts the six major Jewish population centers.

The far more attractive facilities of the Jewish community center of today are certainly a draw to both Jews and non-Jews and it very often constitutes the most attractive recreational, social, cultural and physical educational facility in the suburbs. The availability of these services to nearby residents becomes a factor in affiliation.

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The Jewish community center is a more attractive facility, conveniently located, with relatively open doors, and in addition, a recreation bargain compared with comparable facilities of a commercial character. Of course, one also needs to compare it with the facilities of the YMCAs, YWCAs, and the public

\* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Grossinger, New York, May 30, 1978.

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted as Oscar Janowsky, *The Jewish Community Center, Two Essays on Basic Purpose*, National Jewish Welfare Board, New York, 1974.

recreation centers where the economic advantage is not that marked.

Given the above, there is a need to review both the policies and practices of the Jewish community center with respect to Jewish/Gentile affiliation and participation. We hear more questioning by lay people and other Jewish communal professionals as to how the agency can justify non-Jewish membership. Often this is put in terms of "Why should Jewish funds go to supplement non-Jewish members?" or "Why should non-Jews receive scholarships that are paid for by Jewish money?" A more perceptive question is, "How is it possible to carry out a Jewish oriented program with non-Jewish participants as part of the various groups in the Center?"

These questions are most appropriate and the ready answers that we had yesterday will not do for today. This kind of questioning cannot be readily dispelled with the slogan that because Centers get money from the United Way, they must accept non-Jews. There are a number of Jewish communal agencies that restrict their caseload or their intake policy to Jews, and there are even two very substantial Jewish community centers in the United States, namely Baltimore and Detroit, who limit membership to Jews. A recent publication of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, the National Conference of Catholic Charities, and the National Council of Churches of Christ notes, "Each sectarian agency has had the right to formulate objectives and develop policies and programs in health, welfare and related services which express the unique sectarian values of that group. Where appropriate, and as an expression of its values, the sectarian agency may provide services to persons who are not members of that sectarian community. But a sectarian agency should not be compelled to extend its services beyond persons of its own group if there is a likelihood that its sectarian purposes and values would be diluted or would

disappear."<sup>3</sup> A number of agencies can hold that the United Way is after all a central coordinating and central funding body and also a planning instrument, and that its function is to be responsive to the constituent parties of the United Way rather than to direct agency policies. A great deal has been made of the United Way's acceptance of the concept of pluralism. This could lead, very logically then, to a series of agencies regarding as their "mission" service to their own community, e.g., Asians, Blacks, Chicanos, Jews, etc.

There has been some testing on the part of Jewish community centers of the kind of support they would get from United Way if they were to limit their membership policy. The response has been generally positive. It has been more convenient to use the rationale that because Centers are funded by United Way we cannot modify our open membership policy. The day has come to look at this question in contemporary reality, rather than in historical terms. United Way has been directed by the regulations of the Civil Service Commission pertaining to soliciting funds in government agencies that require in the soliciting agency policies of affirmative action, open membership, mixed board membership and other such policies. Recent regulations of the Civil Service Commission do not indicate that it is inappropriate for a sectarian agency to limit its board of directors, its constituency or its staff, as long as it can be demonstrated that such limitations are designed to maintain the integrity of the group and that discrimination on the basis of race is not being practiced.

Another very common argument is the economic one that non-Jews, through their membership and their participation, make it possible to conduct some activities which would not otherwise have sufficient enrollment; or because they tend to use physical education facilities primarily (a very common

<sup>3</sup> A Statement on United Ways and Interfaith Consultation on Social Welfare, p. 3.

assumption for which the evidence is not conclusive), that they are, in effect, supporting the agency. Even assuming that the economic argument is accurate, economic necessity alone hardly seems a cogent basis for formulating social policy, though there have been such instances at times.

A case example of this is the nursery school, which very often has a high percentage of non-Jews, and where the economic argument can probably be shown as being appropriate. The nursery school is regarded as one of the most significant of educational processes with respect to Jewish identification as well as general social adjustment. Its Jewish mission would merit community support per se as a Jewish experience. At present time, most Centers regard the nursery school as a luxury which upper middle class people value and for which they are willing to pay. Once one envisages the possibility of an exclusively Jewish school, its overall community benefits become apparent. Clearly a good case can be made for such exclusivity being within the function of the day schools; a large part of the Jewish community wants a mix of Jew and non-Jew as part of the educational experience of their children. If they did not want this, they would be organizing more and more day schools, at least at the nursery school level. Or perhaps it is not that parents want a Jewish/non-Jewish mix but rather that they want a lower level of Jewish programmatic experience than the day school or congregational school experience would provide.

Assuming people do want a mixed school population, it then truly becomes a matter of social philosophy and dictates that the Jewish community center, in response to the needs of the people and the community, provide a nursery school with Jewish programming emphasis but which admits non-Jews out of its social and educational philosophy and not out of economic necessity. Were this issue faced in these terms, we could then look at some curriculum questions which should flow from this kind of social-philosophical point of view.

Given this educational perspective, inter-

cultural programming becomes a valid part of the nursery school curriculum with the recognition and respect of the religious, racial, ethnic and cultural traditions of those persons who are not Jewish reflected in the nursery school program. Obviously, this is a controversial point. Many persons could be found who would hold that the non-Jews who send their children to a Jewish nursery school are prepared for their child to be exposed to the Jewish emphasis without feeling any compulsion to have the child's own religious experience, racial background or ethnic traditions reflected in the school curriculum since these persons would hold that this is adequately done in the home or in other settings. While this may indeed be the case, one always wonders about the educational enrichment which accompanies cultural interchange within the nursery school situation. In fact, Jerome Bruner makes a good deal of people learning their own traditions through an examination of the traditions of others and a kind of counterpointing of cultures.<sup>4</sup>

There was a time when the matter of open membership was debated in the Jewish community. In fact, a substantial controversy occurred some years ago between representatives of the New Orleans Jewish Community Center and representatives of the National Jewish Welfare Board. It was held at that time that open membership was a fundamental policy for the Jewish community center, and indeed, that a condition of affiliation with the National Jewish Welfare Board was the affirmation by an applying agency. It is interesting that the recent literature of the National Jewish Welfare Board emphasizes not open membership in the sense that we have traditionally known it, but that "the Center shall be open to all Jews of the community." Clearly, we need to look at the contemporary meaning of open membership.

The Jewish community for many years held that it could not seek to isolate itself from the

<sup>4</sup> Jerome S. Bruner, *Toward a Theory of Instruction*. Cambridge: Belnap Press, Harvard University, 1976.

rest of the community, that Jewish association with non-Jews was in and of itself a value. It was felt that such association aided non-Jewish recognition and greater awareness of Jews; further that Jews should certainly adopt policies of restricting interaction with others when they have themselves been subject to restriction for so many years. The Jewish community has modified this stance in many ways in the last years. There has been a more open discussion and agreement on Jewish particularism and Jewish separateness and the primacy of Jews caring first for other Jews. One need not belabor the whole evolution of the process through the Holocaust, the civil rights movement and its aftermath, and the rising ethnic assertiveness.

What is much more appropriate to review is that within today's society, what are the virtues of an open membership policy? Certainly the case can continue to be made that Jewish/non-Jewish association tends to promote better understanding between the two groups. This, however, is still open to some doubt since some of the research on intergroup relations does not automatically demonstrate that bringing people together necessarily promotes greater understanding.

It would be most inappropriate, in my view, to justify non-Jewish membership in the Jewish community center either on the basis of economic necessity or as compliance with the policies of central funding bodies. A primary criterion suggested for the adoption of such a policy should be, "is it good for the Jews?" Here debate can be endless. Some persons can surely make a case for an open membership policy being good for the Jews, and others can make an equally valid case for it being bad for the Jews, or at least if not bad, neutral. But the issue must be joined on relevant terms to the principal purpose for which the Jewish community center exists, and that is to serve Jews in a way that enhances Jewish life. We can then apply criteria as to whether certain policies do or do not enhance Jewish life. Even here, we are probably in the never-never land of rationalization, being

capable of justifying almost anything.

It is, therefore, quite timely to look at specific implications of non-Jewish membership Jewish groups and Jewish community centers, and how that participation influences the achievement of Jewish purposes. Previously it was noted that most Center Directors responding to this survey felt that there was no difficulty in carrying out the Jewish purposes of the agency with non-Jewish members. Perhaps a more appropriate question would be at what levels is there no noted impact, at what levels is there a noted positive benefit and at what levels is there a noted negative impact toward the achievement of Jewish purposes. It is probably fair to say that there are some quantitative indices that will influence judgments in these three interactions. It is also possible to say, given the direct staff member's responsibility for the group, that his or her views about open membership policy, about the importance of the Jewish purpose of the agency and his or her knowledge are all important variables on whether Jewish purposes can be carried out with minor, moderate or significant non-Jewish participation. My own experience would suggest that the presence of non-Jews is almost always a factor in diminishing the *potential* of what can be achieved in Jewish constituency and given a staff person who is highly motivated to carry out the Jewish purposes of the agency and skilled in the methodology to do this, the optimum exists for meeting Jewish ends. Now a very good case can also be made for the fact that there are benefits as a consequence of having Jewish and Gentile participation in a group and that some of these are "Jewish benefits."

It would seem that a careful survey project would be most helpful which initially merely sought to elicit the open and honest perceptions by both direct leadership and supervisory staff to how non-Jewish participation influenced their working toward the Jewish purposes of the agency. Such a survey could seek to establish the ideological preference of the individual so that the attitudes reflected

about Jewishness could be checked against where that person's views were located on the particularistic-universalistic continuum.

Not much has been said about the community relations view of the open membership policy of the Jewish community centers. Since, by and large, Centers have not "rocked the boat" on this issue, the Jewish community relations agencies have not become involved. Another line of inquiry would be to consult with Jewish community relations persons, both lay and professional, on their views of a modification of the open membership policy. It is my feeling that we would see some old ideas resurrected, hopefully clothed in more modern garb. It is my view that the Jewish community center has withdrawn to its present position, rather than having made a conscious decision to reorient its direction with a careful analysis of the consequences of that decision. There is, in fact, some very good evidence that this withdrawal has resulted in a lack of participation on the part of the Jewish community in health, education and social welfare concerns which were so much a part of its agenda pre-1960.

There are, obviously, policies regarding personnel that need review if we are to rethink the open membership issue. We are generally accepting of the idea that we must find personnel who are Jewishly knowledgeable and who are dedicated to the enhancement of Jewish life, both for the individual and the community. Given this formulation, staff would again have to meet the criterion of their role being principally to do "what is good for the Jews." The young adults who staff most Center groups, with their ambivalences regarding their own Jewishness, their relationship to non-Jews, and their view of society, while very commendable and understandable as part of the human search at this age level, constitute a different group from those staff who are committed to the primacy of serving the Jewish person and the Jewish group while understanding the relationship of serving non-Jews within the context of this primary function. The matter of affirmative action

programs and United Way policies, the regulations of the Civil Service Commission and other such matters could be readily coped with if we could assertively say that this is the kind of personnel that is necessary to help us carry out the purposes for which the agency exists.

We are, of course speculating in much of this discussion. It seems somewhat obvious that the absence of any substantial literature on this subject and its absence from the forums of Jewish community centers and Jewish communal service is no mere accident. The absence of research is even more lamentable. We could find out a number of things without a great deal of difficulty if we truly put ourselves to the task. For example, some of the following should be determined:

1. Is a particular agency's Jewish membership decreasing or increasing? Is there some solid evidence to support this, rather than the executive's feel of the situation?
2. Is participation of non-Jews proportionate to their membership in the Center, or is it not? If it is disproportionate, in what program areas is it disproportionate?
3. In an analysis of individual groups, are there differences between what happens Jewishly in given groups and the number of non-Jewish persons in the groups?
4. Is the staff member's orientation to the open membership policy a factor at the intake level? For example, does a staff member who has a very high sense of primacy to service to the Jewish constituency put forward a great deal more effort in outreach and interpretation of day care programs, day camp programs, nursery school programs and other activities to the Jewish community rather than rely on a more generalized approach?
5. What steps are consciously taken by the agency in order to reach out to its primary constituency?

It appears to the writer that this may be the most significant issue in the next decade for the Jewish community center. It is alarming that so little is being done to bring the matter into the open. There are a number of possible

reasons for this which can be formulated:

1. Since it is so sensitive a matter, individual Centers will deal with the problem very quietly and, to the extent possible, informally.

2. The problem is a very partial one and only concerns the nursery school or the adult classes of the physical education department.

3. The Centers' economic future depends on membership fees, class fees, nursery school tuition, camp fees, etc. and there is no way out of this economic bind.

4. The physical plant was overbuilt to serve the Jewish population and consequently additional members are needed to pay for it.

5. The standards of service that Jews expect require better facilities, better staff and a diversified program.

6. We cannot forget our past. We do not want to discriminate. We want to be part of the total society.

All of these are realities and very valid concerns. If simply accepted as realities without an analysis of their potential for change, they may be the undoing of the Jewish community center as we know it.

The economic argument must be the first to be resolved. We cannot, in my judgment, solve this problem without very substantial increased funding from Federations. Such funding must make sense from a Jewish communal perspective. The best Jewish community centers in the country serve 20 to 30 percent of the total Jewish population of their communities. When one takes into consideration a turnover rate of 15 to 20 percent annually, some Jewish community centers touch almost every Jewish family in a five-year period. There are many other centers where this is not the case. Large sections of the Jewish community are not served by a Center either for economic reasons, the location of the Center or institutional competitiveness. If

the Jewish community center were to target the Jewish community as its service clientele, it could do some of the following:

1. Identify Jewish families and individuals who fall in the income class above the scholarship eligibility scale but whose income is not sufficient for them to pay full membership fees, nursery school, day camp and various class fees. Such a targeting might result in a sliding scale arrangement for *all* Jewish community center services including the health club.

2. Identify ideological populations and find a way of serving them within their ideological position. The clearest example would be to provide separate swim, dance, gym, and so forth programs for Orthodox families.

3. Give consideration to a policy which gives some kind of credit to persons who pay congregational dues or give in an appropriate manner to the Jewish Federation.

4. Broaden the scope of Jewish community center services so that the agency is more than a place for recreation and informal education. Let the Center become involved with many aspects of Jewish life. There is a large number of Jews who do not belong to synagogues and whose children get little or no Jewish education. There are particular populations that have little to do with the organized Jewish community.

If the Jewish community center were to have as its objective serving the total Jewish community, it would find many ways to serve, many institutions with which to work in providing such services and the finances for the conduct of such services. I do not mean to suggest that the problem of serving non-Jews would go away overnight, but the radical reorientation of the Center (read Jewish communal agency) would put this problem in a perspective with which we could deal.