

## The Professional Worker and the Jewish Component in Communal Practice\*

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*With the loosening of community bonds and constraints, the individual Jew faces difficult and uncharted situations: how to be an "I" without at the same time turning his back on the "we" commitment. How to live as an individual Jew, yet being part and parcel of the life of the Jewish community.*

This paper complements Charles Zibbell's masterful formulation of the Jewish component in Jewish communal practice<sup>1</sup> with discussion of the professional's role—including among the professionals those who work outside, as well as those inside, the framework of the organized Jewish community.

Charles Zibbell referred to the sweeping changes in America and on the American Jewish scene. No element in society can escape the impact of these changes. The profession of Jewish communal service will also be transformed by these forces of change. They may be revolutionary or evolutionary, voluntarily accepted by the profession, or imposed upon us—they even may in some degree be influenced by the professionals themselves, but change within the communal profession and, in fact, all professions is inevitable.

And yet there persists the static view which assumes that upon completion of professional education, we are adequately prepared and qualified for practice thenceforth. This assumption is more and more under question in our society and by governmental bodies. By now, all states require up-grading, involving continuing study in a host of professional fields to retain professional certification. National professional bodies are getting into

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Zibbell, "The Jewish Component in Jewish Communal Practice," *this Journal*, Vol. LV, No. 2 (1978), pp. 141-47.

the act, moving toward self-certification in their fields of professional practice and providing continuing education to keep up with new developments. In the field of Jewish communal service we are just beginning to talk about guidelines for professional education for Jewish communal service and some study courses for those already in practice have been developed in a number of local communities. However, requiring certification to enter the Jewish communal field and certification to remain in practice still seem years away.

Nevertheless, professional education is in transition. In a not so distant past, social work was the accepted primary and core discipline in Jewish communal practice. Jewish social work education was largely taboo. The Jewish School of Social Work was allowed to close in the late 30s and we accepted the principle that non-sectarian schools of social work alone were needed in order to produce generic social workers able to practice equally well in any setting. During the ensuing years, training for sectarian social work was not provided for in professional circles.

And yet even then general schools of social work were changing with the times. From sole emphasis on individuals' psychological needs and interests, schools of social work moved to concepts of social advocacy and then to emphasis on ethnicity. (There is a growing recognition that ethnicity must be much more broadly defined to embrace all minorities and all cultures.)

At the same time as these changes had been taking place in general schools of social work, the Jewish community also experienced rising

ethnic consciousness. As the melting pot illusion evaporated in American society, so we in communal service turned inward and started to establish graduate training programs for the field of Jewish communal service, some leaders in the field even conceptualizing it as a unitary profession. The educational programs are proliferating and the field has to face the issue as to whether they should be recognized as professional schools, in their own right, and not as merely supplemental to professional education. This would require reexamination of the historical emphasis on social work as being the core discipline. Programs of graduate education for Jewish communal service are requesting recognition of their full legitimacy. The Conference of Jewish Communal Service has taken some initial steps by creating a vehicle for bringing together people in professional education and others in professional practice in an effort to clarify goals and directions in Jewish communal service. The Conference has also encouraged the establishment of continuing study groups of professionals in local communities, primarily focused on Jewish enrichment courses.

We need to know more about the who and the what and the how of our profession. Professions are usually defined as a field of practice requiring special knowledge and special skills. Such definitions do not always feature special and unique values and commitments. The definition of our profession with its variants includes all of these elements—knowledge, skills, values and commitments.

There is a school of thought that still believes professional social work practice should be non-judgmental and non-value laden. This requires a separation of the personal and professional self, perhaps best typified by the traditional practice in psychiatry, the rationale being that each client needs to discover for himself who and what he is, his values and his own adaptive competence. Being exposed to the personal values and commitments of the professional worker might intrude upon the client's process and change the nature of his emerging values and commitments.

But there is a burgeoning school of thought to the effect that in practice we cannot separate the personal and professional selves nor should we attempt to. We are learning that in inter-personal communication values and commitments are as much and as often transmitted, not alone by what is said or non-said, but by all kinds of body and sensory languages. The question then becomes *how* to use constructively our personal values and commitments in professional practice, since we use them whether we are aware of it or not.

In my past experience as an executive of a large "Y," I remember that I could largely forecast the kind of program that would evolve if I knew the interests, values and commitments of my staff. If the professional was deeply interested in Judaism, Israel, social action, the arts, culture or sports—that was the direction his program developed, which inevitably reflected his beliefs and his priorities.

If essentially we can only be our real selves in professional practice, with our real beliefs, what kind of people should be brought in the field to be "role models." What should be their background, their education, their experiences and their beliefs? What need practitioners learn about how to use their "real selves" constructively and professionally?

I need not dwell on the importance of the professional being a role model. Those of us who have worked with youth gangs have realized how destructive an indigenous role model can be to others in the gang. Less visibly, all of us in our work have seen how constructive a beautiful professional role model or indigenous role model can be in moving an individual or group to positive goals and activities. We need much more study and research in understanding ourselves and effectively utilizing ourselves professionally as role models.

This leads to the issue of how we perceive our professional goals in serving Jewish individuals and the Jewish community. Are these separable entities? Can we serve either of these, without being concerned about the welfare of the other or is the relationship

between them organic, with the welfare of one dependent on the other? Are they "Siamese" twins, which can be surgically separated and still each develop healthily?

These are stubborn questions that have plagued our profession for a long time. An extreme example that explains the key professional issue is when we deal with a potential intermarriage situation. Should we be solely guided by what is best for the individual or should we also allow the question to intrude as to what is best for the Jewish community?

The "I" and the "we" are a relatively new phenomenon for Jews. By faith, tradition and history the Jew has been largely a "we" and not an "I." The individual was inextricably bound to the community concept and practice. It is only recently and where Jews did not need to huddle together out of fear or desire, that the "I" concept developed to any marked degree. While respect for the individual and his dignity had been stressed, it was expected to be in the context of a community consciousness and a community involvement.

With the loosening of community bonds and constraints, the individual Jew faces difficult and uncharted situations: how to be an "I" without at the same time turning his back on the "we" commitment. How to live as an individual Jew, and yet being part and parcel of the life of the Jewish community. To the alienated Jew, the question is raised can we live a creative and healthy life as an individual without participating in the life of the Jewish community? Can one be a biological Jew, terminating Judaism when he dies, without impacting on the Jewish community and con-

tributing to its preservation and continuity, and still be a wholesome individual? Is the Jew an individual Jew or is he also a collective Jew, a "community" Jew?

If our professional role is to link the "I" and the "we," then new questions become evident. What is our professional role in serving the community aspect of the client? What guidelines for Jewish living should we be offering? Should our approach be purely sociological or are these aspects of a common ideology, made up of Judaic values and commitments, that would provide a foundation for ensuring Jewish survival and continuity?

In summary, if we are to deal effectively with the Jewish component of professional practice, we must begin to look not only as to what is Jewish about the content of our program, but what is special and uniquely Jewish about our professional practice. Beyond knowledge and skills which are part and parcel of all professions, the special and unique elements are the Judaic value and commitment elements in professional practice. We have been wary in utilizing these elements because of our concern that we might be imposing our personal value systems upon the people we serve. This may not be necessarily so. We need to study and research how we can serve as role models, exposing our clients to value and commitment systems, and still help them maintain their freedom of choice—to accept, reject or adapt. We may be able to become much more effective Jewish communal service professionals, if we can utilize these creative forces within ourselves.