

Community Relations Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*

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In Jewish community relations, as in every other aspect of Jewish life, there has necessarily been a constant interplay of continuity and change, of shifting events and priorities and constant underlying principles. A major question flows from this interplay of events and responses: How has the Jewish community relations program maintained its continuity of objectives while adapting to meet changing needs?

Last week Weiss and Schwartz had their regular Thursday argument. This time, the question was Jewish community relations.

"It's a whole new world," proclaimed Weiss. "We Jews in the United States have to be on guard, yes, but against what? Only threats to Jewish communities overseas. We are secure ourselves, but we are one, you know. We ought to have a demonstration every week. If it weren't for the unending fight of the Arab extremists against Israel and their propaganda in the U.S., and for Soviet Russia's hostility to Israel and to Jews already in their clutches, and for the dangers threatening Jews in Latin America and the Falashas and Jews in Moslem countries, we could forget about community relations and concentrate on Jewish education and serving Jews with special needs. For our community relations, all we have to do is stand up proudly as Jews and speak our minds on Jewish issues."

"Weiss, you're crazy!" said Schwartz. "Nobody says we're on the eve of a new Holocaust, but anti-Semitism is alive and thriving in the United States just as it always has been. Why, there's a Nazi bookstore two blocks from where I live! They want a license to parade, just like Skokie. A KKK leader was interviewed respectfully on our local television station. Nobody lets the Jews alone. Christian missionaries posing as Jews have a house next to the State College campus and the Jewish kids are going in for that and for all kinds of weird cults. Minority groups we helped for years are blaming us for discriminating against them. Our local school board is planning to open the day with prayers in every class, and our Board of

Elections scheduled a primary for Yom Kippur. We have to plan our community relations in recognition that it's the same as it has always been."

"You're not keeping your eye on the ball, Schwartz," replied Weiss. "You're getting ready to fight the last war, not the next one. Why, even the deicide charge against the Jews has been disavowed. The community relations agencies should be concentrating on protesting anti-Zionist threats, by the Arabs and the Reds, at the U.N. and in this country—not worrying about old-fashioned anti-Semitism, which really doesn't amount to anything. And there's no reason for them to promote everyone else's civil rights. If we all do our job as citizens in solving social problems, nobody will be complaining about discrimination—that's not a Jewish community relations question."

"You're so advanced, Weiss, that you've lost touch with basic realities," Schwartz rejoined. "What can the Jews, less than 3 percent of the people in the U.S., do for Israel or Jews in the Soviet Union or in troubled lands just by statements and complaints, without getting help from friends and public officials? If the Jewish community relations agencies don't keep working as they always have in cooperation with Christian religious, black, labor, and other groups to eliminate unequal opportunity and friction, the Jews will be isolated and ultimately defenseless in this country."

And so it went, on and on.

In this dialogue, Schwartz and Weiss express arguments that are not unfamiliar, and at times, as here, they are pitted against each other. Yet, as we know, they are complementary, not opposing, views and they are both right. That is the gist of this article.

Persistence of Problems Amid Changing Priorities

Of course it is a whole new world, not just today, but every year and every week. Continuously in the course of time, and every now and then by a quantum leap, the world and national situations and the attitudes of groups in the general community undergo massive changes to something new and different. Here are only a few highlights: the rise of German Nazism; the creation of the State of Israel; Stalin's Night of the Murdered Poets and Doctors' Plot; the Six Day—War and the Yom Kippur War; Vatican Council II and the Roman Catholic Church's abrogation of the charge of deicide; the Supreme Court school desegregation decision in 1954 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964; the burning of the cities in the 1960s; the drive for women's equality and the resistance to it; and, most recently, the Camp David framework agreements and their momentous consequences.

Obviously, Weiss is right that it would be folly indeed to conduct Jewish community relations work as though such changes had never taken place. It would be nonsense to waste time, money, energy and thought combating problems which have diminished to insignificance, and dangerous nonsense to refuse to concentrate efforts upon the current priority problems that do exist and threaten to grow.

But Schwartz is right too. Upon analysis, the brand new priorities can be recognized as variants of the *old* problems in *new* guise—and I put equal emphasis upon the *old* and the *new*. For instance:

Nothing exactly like the present situation of Jews in the Soviet Union ever existed before. Imagine, a fully assimilated population brought up in ignorance of its heritage and purposely alienated from it awakening to it spontaneously, teaching itself at great risk, seeking with courage and persistence to escape from oppressive restrictions! Of course this ever-changing process poses new tasks for community relations programming to interpret

the needs of Jews in Russia and to promote effective action by the American people and American authorities. Yet should we not recall that the American Jewish Committee was founded in 1906 specifically to promote adequate American response to the Kishinev programs in the early years of this century? What is new priority, what is old?

Another example: The theme of a huge Pulaski Day parade in New York in October of this year was the protest of Polish American groups all over the country against the recent fad of Polish jokes that demean and belittle. The Polish Americans of course would like the support of Jews and other groups in this campaign, just as their local groups in various cities have joined Jewish and other organizations in proclaiming human rights and condemning Soviet machinations. Unprecedented! Yet the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith was established in 1913 initially to protest demeaning un-American stereotypes on the vaudeville stage, not just anti-Semitic ones, but those slandering all demarcated groups.

Another: The overwhelming priority in Jewish community relations programming in recent years has been education regarding Israel and other issues of international import which demand action by the United States. A new and recent wrinkle, for instance, was the stunningly unpredictable Big Lie of the Soviet Union and the Arab states, equating Zionism with racism. This posed a very dangerous new threat, requiring the most strenuous community relations efforts to interpret the two-thousand year longing of Jews for Eretz Yisroel and Jerusalem and Jewish abhorrence of racism. This particular canard, that Zionism is racism, was only recently invented, and it immediately became a new priority. Yet, was not the American Jewish Congress formed after World War I to supply a voice on behalf of the shattered Jewish communities in Europe and to monitor adherence to the Balfour Declaration?

Final example: A current priority of many

* Presented to the General Assembly, Council of Jewish Federations, San Francisco, November 10, 1978.

of the local Jewish community relations committees is the cementing of positive cooperative arrangements with organizations of the black community, in response to something brand new: the Bakke decision and strongly felt differences regarding quotas and affirmative action. Black-Jewish relationships in each community have undergone numerous vicissitudes over the years, with low points perhaps in the late 1960s when the slogan "Black Power" was raised in a manner that had anti-Semitic overtones and in the pre-Bakke *contretemps* over reverse discrimination; but also with high points in 1954 at the time of visible black-Jewish alliance in providing for testimony before the Supreme Court the harmful effects of segregation on school children and in the early 1960s when there was visible Jewish support for the civil rights drive. Yet in the 1940s, when the CRCs were being formed in the larger cities, one of the top Jewish community relations priorities was simultaneously opposing discriminatory quotas and campaigning for equal opportunities. At that time this anti-discrimination work was recognized by Negroes and Jews, each then regarded as a minority group, to be in the interest of both groups, and to be necessary for realization of the American dream of pluralistic democracy and equality.

Thus, in Jewish community relations, as in every other aspect of Jewish life, there has necessarily been a constant interplay of continuity and change, of shifting events and priorities and constant underlying principles. A major question flows from this interplay of events and responses: How has the Jewish community relations program maintained its continuity of objectives while adapting to meet changing needs?

Community Relations Programs and Issues

The Jewish community relations program has undergone a very extensive evolutionary development since the early years of the century. Let's examine some of the changes in this field.

We have just discussed, however cursorily,

the *shifts in problems and priorities* as situations and attitudes have changed. Other adaptations should be noted.

There has been an immense *growth* in the *number* and *size* of the agencies dealing with community relations. Of course the whole modern pattern of Jewish community relations organization is an American invention of this century, yet it was not created out of thin air. It was the inheritor of a long tradition that embraced intercession by *stadlonim*, formation of *kehillot*, social action and community representation by rabbis and congregations. But the typical American social agency structure of volunteers and staff, with involvement of diverse elements in the Jewish community, led to the creation of the national and the local community relations agencies. At first they were small and they still are comparatively minor in Jewish life in terms of staff and expenditures, but by now they have become very prominent in terms of significance, visibility, and community interest.

In the early years of the century, several of the national agencies had separate origins as the independent expressions of the interests and wishes of internally like-minded constituencies differing in ideology, concerns, and even to some extent in place of family origin and role in American Jewish life. These small agencies disposed of no great resources. Even their funding was separate and independent of each other and, at first, of the then-young Federation movement. The approaching shadow of Hitler in Europe and the threat of the German-American Bund and the Silver Shirts in this country stimulated growth and concentration of activities, thus creating possibilities of duplication and crossed wires. This simultaneously stimulated to some extent the practice of *coordination*, and the demand for more coordination grew with financing by welfare funds. The situation furthermore brought about two significant related developments: the formation of local community relations committees, first in a few large cities and later in almost every organized community; and the establishment of the National

Community Relations Advisory Council by the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations in 1944, the first really viable process for cooperation and coordination of both national and local agencies in the Jewish community relations field—viable because it was voluntary and advisory in nature.

There have been ups and downs since then in coordination in the common cause, but this creative ferment has led to such further inventions as joint policy formulation, the annual Joint Program Plan, reassessment conferences, an Israel Task Force, and the channeling of a wide range of national agency resources to communities through a widely used community consultation service.

The *basic concepts* of the Jewish community relations field have had growth and change within the pattern of underlying continuity. My approach, up to this point, has been largely in terms of shifting situations. That approach predisposes to a view of program as *response to specific problems*. This was indeed the original idea, and until 1944 the field was known as *Jewish defense* or, more elegantly, *civic protective work*. When the coordinating agency was formed in 1944, its name contained a new term: *community relations*. This signaled an immensely meaningful development in the thinking of the field, from sheerly self-protective action against specific threats to the modern concept of planning forward action and positive programs to strengthen American democracy and the general welfare as the greatest guarantee of Jewish security.

This is accomplished by a process of social action through analysis, education, involvement and community organization. The *fundamental strategy* that has been evolved for Jewish community relations is to proclaim, advocate, and rely upon the strength of the American pluralistic democratic system. This is a country founded on equality and recognition of the rights of all, principles drawn from the Bible and basic Judaic tradition. It is a nation in which there is no majority group—only a mosaic of minorities. The just require-

ments of the Jewish community can, therefore, be interpreted in such a way as to win the endorsement and support of many other significant groups and thus finally to accomplish action by public officials. The inherent other aspect of this strategy, of course, is to cement good relationships with other groups in the population by cooperation in seeking their just demands. Within itself, the Jewish community can by a process of community organization make available and effective the contacts and the skills necessary to form (and sometimes to create and to lead) multigroup coalitions which can powerfully promote the needed actions.

The *techniques* and *tactics* of Jewish community relations have been so diverse over the years, and so ingeniously adapted to changing situations, that it would be impossible to try to catalogue them. Analysis and interpretation; statements, public events, rallies; intergroup and interreligious cooperation; attention to newspapers, films, radio and television, and other media; formal educational procedures and contacts with schools and colleges; maintaining relationships with public officials and other influential persons; legislative research, litigation, and contacts with public administrative bodies; these are only a few of the program instrumentalities that have been and still are in use, but in a great variety of approaches. Each can be valuable if well and skillfully used; each can be wasteful or even disastrous if applied dogmatically by formula and without the necessary continuous study, thought, and internal cooperation within the Jewish community.

A number of issues arise that can only be mentioned within the time available: what is specifically a *Jewish* community relations problem, making it the business of the agencies in this field? How can the different ideologies of different constituencies be reconciled? What tactics are appropriate for different situations? How are militant and conciliatory approaches related and kept compatible? and so forth.

Community Relations—Future

There is a future reference in the title of this article that remains to be dealt with explicitly. It should be considered in relation to the kinds of issues and questions of tactics that have just been noted. These issues and questions are necessarily not soluble once and for all, just as the future is never perfectly predictable and the problem of the future never fully soluble. We can unfortunately predict confidently that Israel will continue to have problems with some of its neighbors for years, that Jews in the Soviet Union and others will continue to live under different circumstances, and that questions of interreligious friction and anti-Semitic manifestations will continue to arise in one locality or another. There will always be some kinds of problems. They can be dealt with effectively by the Jewish community through the ongoing process of planning and community organization. It involves bringing together representatives of the different voices and resources constituting the field, matching up all the agencies' analyses and expectations, following out alternative scenarios regarding different actions, reaching agreement on a program (usually a complex program with multiple roles and approaches, because the problems are complex) and then, to the extent possible, upon the ways that the existing resources can be deployed to accomplish the

agreed ends. Of course such a process is never completed. It must continuously be reviewed, updated, modified, and adapted. Thus it is in fact this process that maintains the continuity of Jewish community relations through shifting situations and changing priorities. The gains of the past and the hopes for the future rest upon the planning and community organization process.

Implications for Federations

Because of the centrality to Jewish community relations work of this process of community organization that I have described, there has been a historical convergence of the Federation and the community relations program. Yet, and I must end with this thought, both in volunteer and professional roles, there are distinctive skills and demands in community relations. Those volunteers and professionals who assume Jewish community relations responsibilities cannot afford to improvise; they must constantly study and analyze the issues, plan and implement complex program activities, and seek interconsultation locally and guidance from national resources. They have undertaken a task vital for community well-being, and they deserve and should have the confidence, backing, and support of the entire Jewish community.