

Reaffirming Jewish Life — The Challenge of Change*

Sidney Z. Vincent

Executive Director Emeritus, Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland, Ohio

. . . in the face of . . . massive and destructive (social and political) changes, can we as professionals and as a Conference, reaffirm Jewish life? Such questions get answered not by speeches but by life. Nevertheless, here are three general directions as a starting point for your consideration this week. None of the three is new. All are continuations of what we are now doing. I see the future requiring us (1) to make our work still more Jewish; (2) to personalize it; (3) to unify it.

This is the tenth anniversary of the famous Youth Revolt in Boston, when the students picketed the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations. I begin with that reference because what all the excitement was about in 1969 was really the theme of the present meeting—"Reaffirming Jewish Life—The Challenge of Change." The students used somewhat different words, mostly the four-letter variety required in those charmingly violent times, but what they were demanding was instant change in the direction of greater Jewish commitment.

The picketing of the Assembly was unprecedented, but even more extraordinary was the reaction of the delegates. Some did tell the kids that their Revolt was "revoltin'," but most of the delegates overwhelmed them with love and respect.

Why? Because while the picketers spoke acidly of the challenge of change, what the delegates heard was young people reaffirming Jewish life.

That encounter suggests that our Jewish attitude toward change is a love-hate relationship. On the one hand, we are perennial leaders in social experiment, eager and enthusiastic about new ideas—both Jewish ideas and social ideas in general. But we also have a long tradition of uneasiness and resistance when change is in the air.

And with good reason. When change has come to us from the outside world, it has nearly always been violent and destructive. When it comes from within, we suspect that assimilation is somehow involved.

So should we be wary of change—or embrace it?

Let's look for our answers in the lessons of the past. I can speak from firsthand experience only about the period since 1945, when I wandered into the field of Jewish communal service. It's a good year to serve as a reference point because it was such a watershed year. The Second World War was ending, and the entire world, Jewish and non-Jewish, was poised on the brink of apocalyptic change.

So here's "The Way We Were" as Jewish professional fields then . . .

In the group work field, my own home community had not even adopted the name "Jewish Community Center," in 1945. The agency was called the "Council Educational Alliance," and the absence of the word "Jewish" is significant. Unlike the changes in our family names, where Cohen becomes Coleman and Levine becomes Lowell, our agency names have become *more* Jewish over the years. The NCRAC becomes the NJCRAC (J = Jewish), the Council Educational Alliance becomes the *Jewish* Community Center. The change in names reflects a change in values.

Although the *direction* of change was clearly toward Jewish values in 1945, we had not yet completed the transition from settlement houses to centers of informal Jewish education. The Janowsky report, with its verdict in favor of a prime Jewish stress for centers, was still three years in the future.

In community relations, Brotherhood Week was the high point of the year's work. We spent much time indignantly denying there was such a thing as "a Jewish vote." Improving the "climate of opinion" was the big deal. The shift from concern about prejudice to fighting against discrimination was just being launched,

a new emphasis that led to civil rights triumphs that would remake America. And the good fight was being led by a coalition of Blacks (still called Negroes in those days), Jews, liberals, and labor—a coalition that seemed eternal.

Jewish education was still a communal step-child. There were almost no day schools except in New York and a few scattered places along the Eastern seaboard; most communities didn't view Jewish education as a communal responsibility altogether.

Homes for the aged were mostly custodial operations for the well aged. Still to come were the sophisticated schemes for looking after the elderly through a whole series of Jewish services, ranging from those for the almost independent to the completely ill and incapacitated.

Family agencies have perhaps changed least. They were already highly professionalized in 1945, with a long record of service to immigrants, the needy, and the maladjusted. But there was as yet little sentiment for addressing seriously the Jewish component in their services.

Federations were largely coordinators of health and welfare agencies. They were raising a lot more money, as the horror of overseas events began to be widely known, but they were just beginning to edge their way toward becoming "central addresses" for the community, taking on responsibilities hitherto undreamed of.

And here we are—a generation later, which in the view of history is a blink of time—and how monumentally our whole enterprise has changed. And no wonder. The world has changed monumentally, thanks to the computers, the conquering of the atom, the coming of television and satellite communication, test tube babies and the pill, genetic engineering, walks on the moon. The explosion of science has been matched by social convulsions in every part of the world, with whole continents in restless disarray, with the emergence of dozens of new nations, with major revolutions—economic, cultural, sexual—remaking the lives and the aspirations of

youth, of women, of entire populations.

And nowhere has change been more cataclysmic than in Jewish life. In all our millennial history, no generation has experienced such heights and such depths as ours, creating new relationships, new responsibilities, new patterns that forever changed our lives as Jews.

We could have been swamped by the dizzy pace of change. But we were *not* swamped. We adapted creatively to change. We reaffirmed Jewish life.

Every field of Jewish communal service examined its Jewish credentials and moved toward making its Jewish component a more central motif in its operation, and that was done with no sacrifice of our participation in the life of the general community. On the contrary. Our agencies became models of professional competence, setting standards of excellence in the care of the sick, of the aged, of children, of the emotionally disturbed, and in the use of leisure time. Our Federations met staggering needs by raising staggering sums—billions of dollars—for overseas needs and local needs . . . the largest, most lasting voluntary philanthropic enterprise in all human history. Our generation has redeemed more refugees than all the generations throughout the centuries before us put together. And we did not simply shuttle the refugees from one land of persecution to another, as in the past; we shaped the migrations *Jewishly*, so that refugees have been truly integrated in Israel, in North America, and throughout the world. At the same time, we outgrew our age-long defensiveness and instinctive reflex of avoiding attention to mount imaginative and powerful programs for achieving Jewish aims: support for Israel, defense of Soviet Jewry, breaking barriers of discrimination.

This very Conference has played its part in that mighty drama of change. If you were at our 1967 Conference, when the fate of Israel hung in the balance that May, just before the Six-Day War, you will never forget how we spontaneously broke into song, how we spontaneously raised funds as we reaffirmed

our faith in Jewish life and continuity, knowing we were bound each to each and to Jews everywhere in defiance of murderous threats. And three months later, many of us met again in Jerusalem, at the first International Conference which we created. In war and in peace, we have helped forge links of professional to professional that have enriched communal service everywhere.

And yet. And yet. Despite all these stunning achievements, the future is full of menace. Our "victories" have usually turned out to be not final triumphs, but conditional progress shadowed by unforeseen complications.

In community relations, we have achieved almost the entire agenda we set ourselves in 1945. But here we are, for all the progress in civil rights, as polarized as ever, with the gulf between Black and White and between Black and Jew, if anything, wider than before, and with dilemmas like affirmative action posing sophisticated problems we never dreamed of.

Our fund-raising has helped create the miracle of Israel reborn, but Israel remains in heart-stopping peril, with internal problems kept below the explosion point only because the external threats are so deadly. The Romantic Period of Israel's Founding Fathers (and Founding Mothers) is over, and we shall soon see whether our campaign slogan "We Are One" is just a slogan, or whether it can prove out in the post-heroic era we are now entering.

Responsibility for Jewish education is now almost universally accepted, and funding for it has escalated, but cranky questions have arisen about the issue of communal support of congregational schools. More disturbing, the gap remains between the Jewish classroom and Jewish life. Some of our schools are excellent, but others turn off more kids than they turn on.

Our agencies put more stress on the Jewish component, but as they do, disturbing questions are raised by United Ways and government about the alleged lack of openness of our institutions. Jewish life as a whole has grown more vivid, more accepted, more sought after, but at the same time, assimilation

is so dramatically on the rise as to threaten our very continuity. Everywhere, there is contradiction, with much progress mirror-imaged by much threat.

Obviously, change has been a two-way street. It has brought us unprecedented progress but unprecedented tragedy. Just as the twin climaxes of Jewish life in our generation, the Holocaust and the founding of Israel, represent the nadir and the apex of millennia of Jewish history, so will we continue to live out our professional lives, torn simultaneously by tragedy and triumph.

The mood of the outside world, only one generation removed from Hitler, seems inclined once again toward tragedy. How else can we interpret the Zionism-is-racism resolution; the brutal stifling of Jewish life in the Gulag Archipelago; the nasty revival of anti-Semitism in South Africa, Jewishly vital but probably doomed; the maniacal clenching of fists, today in Iran and possibly tomorrow in other countries of Islam, unleashing holy furies we have felt before, to our sorrow, in Jewish history.

Such volcanic eruptions can tear us apart, or mold and shape and unite us as a people. The theme of this Conference suggests a hopeful direction, since it defines change as challenge, not as threat. And indeed, unless you are totally apathetic, it *is* wonderfully stimulating and humanly challenging to be a participant in so powerful a drama as contemporary Jewish history.

Absent that drama, other more comfortably situated ethnic groups have faded. The Slovenian and Hungarian and Italian and German traditions—which once developed their own press and their own churches—have pretty much shrunk in meaning to the stature of the annual St. Patrick's Day parades, which have about the same vitality as lingering Jewish pride in being a Litvak or a Galitzianer. The Blacks and the Jews, by contrast, have hung in tough largely because their very foundations have been shaken.

But who wants to survive on the basis of threat, of defiance? As Jewish professionals, we want more. When we chose "Reaffirming

Jewish Life" as our theme, we declared our intention to work for the day when there will be creative Jewish life under conditions of security and peace. That can happen only when what is being preserved matters, and matters supremely, passionately. The proof lies all around us. It is the reason why fundamental Protestantism is surviving better than its more sophisticated denominations; why what seems a primitive form of Islam sweeps over a nation and seizes the imagination of millions; it is why cults of the most outlandish stripe flourish; it is why the Amish have persisted, serenely driving their buggies in the face of the overwhelming technology that surrounds them. To the adherents of each of these disciplines, the values of the group matter more than anything, more than life itself. They know what they believe, they live what they believe, and they persist. A world that has for decades delighted in challenging values and in deflating legends, has begun to hunger for meaning.

So what has all this to do with us as professionals?

Everything. Of course, we will continue to play our active role in combating the external threats to Jewish life. But that is not enough. The problem is, to turn an old phrase upside down, that the flesh is willing but the spirit is weak. That is to say, as a people, we are willing to transport our kids to *their* Jewish schools as long as *we* are excused from the traditional Jewish responsibility to study at all ages. We will make generous gifts at campaign time, but we have little appetite for the complex decisions that have to be made about allocating the funds. In the most literal sense, the disciplines of Jewish life do not hit us where we live; the external threats do. The result is a stark contrast between our imaginative and bold feats of derring-do in the field of world events, where we take on whole governments, and the pedestrian tone of our efforts to shore up tradition. *Naaseh v'nishma* (We shall do and we shall hear) was the pledge our ancestors made at Sinai, and we, their descendants, have turned out to be much better at the doing than at the hearing, a term

which meant listening in order to learn and then to practice Jewish life.

Maybe that's too critical a judgment. A good case can be made that we are slowly building up an indigenous Jewish cultural life here; that there is a significant Jewish ferment on the campus; that the resurgence of Orthodoxy is here to stay; that the other wings of Jewish life are becoming more vigorously traditional; that our own agencies and institutions have become more creative Jewishly. Compared with 1945, there is clearly *more* Jewish stress, more at-homeness in Jewish culture. Nevertheless, we are much more secure in declaring "Never Again" to our enemies than "Always Again" to ourselves.

So what of the future?

The only safe prediction is that there will be change . . . escalating explosive change. Science will continue to double its store of knowledge every twenty years, and will fantastically alter our environment. The growing global polarization, with the whole world divided North and South, rich and poor, Third World and other worlds, will produce social turmoil and violent confrontations, which always spell major trouble for us Jews.

Worst of all, so many noble dreams have withered . . . the 1945 dream of a shining new United Nations, now polluted by the ovation it gave to the little man with the stubbly beard who addressed the peace-making forum with a pistol on his hip, demanding the destruction of Israel; even the dream of brotherhood of man, now tarnished by harsh reality. Dissident Vladimir Bukovsky in his recent *Commentary* article, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" wrote:

The dream of absolute, universal equality is terrifying and inhuman. The moment it captures people's minds, the result is mountains of corpses and rivers of blood, accompanied by attempts to straighten the stooped and shorten the tall. You can achieve absolute equality only in the graveyard.

How then, in the face of these massive and destructive changes, can we as professionals and as a Conference, reaffirm Jewish life?

Such questions get answered not by speeches but by life. Nevertheless, here are three general directions as a starting point for consideration this week. None of the three is new. All are continuations of what we are now doing. I see the future requiring us (1) to make our work still more Jewish; (2) to personalize it; (3) to unify it. A brief word about each.

First, we must make our work more Jewish. Despite our growing Jewish commitment, we are still often thought of as the secularists of Jewish life. We are perceived as the doers, the technicians, the men and women of the present, with shallow roots in the past and little Jewish vision of the future. By the accidents of history and by force of practical necessity, we have been entrusted with too much responsibility and too much authority. As a result, Jewish life as a whole is in danger of being vulgarized or trivialized or sanitized, because although we may be long on efficiency, we are short on passion and self-knowledge.

I would prefer to take such comments less as indictments to be refuted than as warnings to be heeded. The criticism may be vastly overstated, but it is true that the sentiments we express do not always match our actual performance. Take, for example, these annual meetings. They are fervently Jewish in tone. Our heroes here are not the professional experts but those of large Jewish vision: the Irving Greenbergs and Harold Schulweises and David Hartmans, who stimulate us and amuse us and inspire us because of their combination of Jewish warmth and human warmth, honed by their powerful grasp of tradition. And yet, although all three are rabbis, we have developed no ongoing relationship with the rabbinical profession. Jewish life never made a sharp division between the so-called secular and the so-called sacred, but we do, because we live in substantial isolation professionally from our rabbis and scholars.

It may not be our fault. I know they can sometimes be *prima donnas*, and I know how irritating pronouncements from on high can be. But they too are community servants, as we are, with a special responsibility for trans-

mitting the Jewish heritage. We need their insights and knowledge.

That goes for Jewish educators too. They are formally a part *of* our Conference, but much of the time they are apart *from* our Conference. We are only sometime colleagues, who do not really share the same world. Jewish schools are for the most part unengaged with actual Jewish community life; the great challenges that torment us and uplift us in our professional lives are for the most part muted in the classroom. We can help bring vitality into the schools.

And we, who are so frequently Jewishly ignorant, need them too. With the best will in the world, we cannot produce Jewishly if we do not know Jewish. And so, we both suffer a kind of spiritual anemia.

There are good beginnings, mostly at the top level. The leaders in Jewish education and leaders in Jewish communal service and, for that matter, many leading rabbis, frequently intermix and even write progressive resolutions. Gerry Bubis and several counterparts here and there in academia (particularly at Brandeis) have developed ways to bring together the best of community know-how and of Jewish thought. But for most of us, those contacts are undernourished or non-existent.

One prediction seems safe enough: Jewish agencies during the next generation will either present increasingly sturdy Jewish credentials or they will gradually drop out of the family of Jewish agencies as they rely more and more on third-party payments and as their programs in fact become less and less Jewishly distinctive.

Will this emphasis on more Jewish content separate us from the general community? Some say yes. They suggest it is time for us to "look inward," since our prime obligation now is the opposite of what it was in the days of the immigrants. Then we sought to make Jews into good Americans; the need now is to help Americans be good Jews. Nevertheless, I think it is pernicious to talk about "looking inward" as if we could achieve our Jewish objectives only at the expense of playing our full part on the general communal scene. The great men of an earlier day, Abba Hillel Silver,

Stephen S. Wise, Louis D. Brandeis, knew better. All won their spurs in *both* the Jewish world and the general community. Immersion in one brought greater effectiveness in the other.

Moreover, as the fate of the Jewish community increasingly rests not only on our own efforts but on the quality of the allies we create—allies that shift from year to year and from issue to issue—we are required by “selfish” interests as well as general humanitarian interests to work diligently within the worlds of government, of United Way, of many associations seeking human betterment. Jews by themselves cannot persuade the Soviet Union to open the gates of emigration nor guarantee the security of Israel. We need to involve others, and we can secure their support in issues of crucial importance to us only to the degree that we are involved in the critical problems facing them. In an open society, to be fully Jewish is to be fully American, fully human.

Two: We must *personalize* our work.

Maybe it is a bum rap for our communities to be viewed as closed corporations. But accurate or not, that is frequently the perception. Being an “establishment” is no longer the mortal crime it was in the sixties, but there is still a widespread feeling of “What’s the use? The boys downtown decide it all anyway.”

Not so incidentally, nobody claims that the girls downtown do the deciding. And that is part of the dilemma. Though women do now vie with men for many posts of agency responsibility, few become presidents of major organizations, just as few become directors of major agencies. Even this Conference has had only a handful of women presidents.

But change is at hand. Women are obviously doing their own reaffirming of their rights as part of their challenge of change. Often that means less interest in the traditional role of volunteer and more in direct professional work. The cry of “We want in” not formally, patronizingly in, but *really* in—is a growing slogan not only for women, but for youth, for the Orthodox community, and, less broadly

and less frequently, for academia.

But the problem created by those who come impatiently knocking on our door is a happy problem; more intractable is the problem of ignorance and apathy. What proportion of our communities neither know nor care about what we do is anybody’s guess, but those who are equally bored by the challenge of change and reaffirmation of Jewish life threaten us most of all by their listlessness. How to deal with those who don’t care is a challenge that no democratic institution has effectively met.

Neither have we. Our services are usually prized and sought out by many, but a real understanding of agency function and problems is limited to the few. Of course, most of us work at broadening our base, through rotation in office, through keeping the portals of entry open, through seeking out representation from all sections of the community. But maybe the best we can do, so to speak, is the very best we can do. That is to say, those agencies and those communities that perform outstandingly may still not be immune from charges of elitism, but their work will be known and recognized, and high quality is the best attracter of leadership. Maybe no democratic institution can do much more.

And evidently we cannot run our communities on a “One man, one vote” basis if we are serious about reaffirming Jewish life. We are fundamentally in conflict with the need of our times, reflected in such slogans as: “Let it all hang out,” “How to Take Care of Number One,” “I’m O.K., You’re O.K.” That is not the Jewish way; Jewish life has historically sought a balance between the claims of the individual and the claims of society, with mutual obligations. Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver put it this way in his book, *Where Judaism Differs*:

Judaism maintained a balance between the individual and society . . . The individual was called upon to seek the good life through active participation in the responsibilities of community life. The community as such was required to set up institutions that would assist the individual in his quest for the good life . . . It granted no complete autonomy to

the individual, but neither did it consent to its total submergence.

The meaning of that delicate balance to us as professionals is that we have the double responsibility of individualizing and personalizing our work, while retaining a firm grip on where we mean to go Jewishly. It also means not getting bogged down by organization. Of course we will necessarily turn more and more to data processing to help us in our work, but clients and prospects can never be printouts. Our most constant criticism in Federation work, for example, is "You think of me only at Welfare Fund time." The message is, "Think of me as a person . . . a specific human being."

We have achieved prestige within the American Jewish community, never associated before in Jewish life with professionals who were not scholars, and the danger of status and bigness is bureaucracy. We can become suffocated by routines and a sense of our own importance.

A homely illustration. Some of us retain the wasteful habit of answering the telephone directly. I do. I know that there are good reasons for busy men and women to have their secretary filter out calls, and maybe it is only good sense to know whom you will be talking to before you come on the line. But I have never done it. In the face of good business practice, I stand ready to talk to anybody who cares to call, and I am prepared to pay the price of some wasted time in order to avoid communal stuffiness.

I sometimes wonder what would happen when that busy executive, Rappaport, instructs his secretary to get Goldstein on the line, and Goldstein instructs *his* secretary not to call him to the phone until the caller is ready to talk. Such Goldsteins and such Rappaports deserve each other.

Finally, we must *unify*. This Conference over the years has debated at length the nature of the unity that binds us together as professionals. Are we essentially specialists? Group workers or caseworkers or community organizers or community relations workers or what not, who achieve some measure of inter-disci-

plinary cooperation through the medium of our professional disciplines? Or are we essentially all members of a single communal service with valuable specialized functions that are nevertheless less crucial than our unified professional aim?

I am less interested now in debating again the niceties of organization within the Conference than in how that question relates to our theme of reaffirming Jewish life. From that perspective, I come down hard on the side of what binds us together rather than what distinguishes us. I take delight in the untidy fact that so many of our Federations are headed by those who come from other fields. I rejoice that in my own community we have moved professionals from assignment to assignment, from community relations to planning to fund-raising to community organization, to emphasize the interrelatedness of all our work. I am partial to the view that sees all our agencies as expressions of a central communal purpose, with the whole being greater than the sum of its parts.

Of course we should retain our individual skills and responsibilities as community organizers or group workers or educators, or whatever. But if we are truly to reaffirm Jewish life in the face of the challenge of change, then in the deepest sense and in the most practical sense, we are, all of us, fund-raisers, all educators, all community relations workers. The task of raising the dollars that make possible all our work is of course the particular responsibility of some of us, but because none of us can exist as Jewish communal service workers if there are no dollars, all of us are concerned, all of us are or should be involved in the problems of raising as well as spending those dollars. The task of combating anti-Semitism and of protecting Israel is a particular responsibility of some of us, but since none of us could creatively exist in a world dominated by hate, therefore all of us must be concerned, all of us must be passionately involved in the struggles for human decency and in the protection and nourishing of Israel. The task of educating our children Jewishly is the direct responsibility of

REAFFIRMING JEWISH LIFE

some of us, but since education is clearly too crucial to be left only to educators, therefore all of us, by the nature of our daily work, are also creative Jewish teachers, because we are devoting our lives to the preservation of some phase of Jewish continuity. How to deal with the displacements and difficulties of Jewish family life is the particular responsibility of some of us, but all of us have a prime stake in the healthy and Jewish functioning of family

life because its decay will undermine all our work.

We are therefore bound to each other humanly, Jewishly, and professionally, and I know no better defense against the challenge of change than the conversion of this generally accepted principle of interdependence into the living stuff of our daily work and relationships.