

# A SPECIALIST IN JEWISH EDUCATION WITHIN A FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S AGENCY

BRUCE I. KARP, ACSW

*Director of Religious Education, Jewish Board of Family  
and Children's Services, New York*

*Historically, Jews have been particularly vulnerable to the discriminatory repercussions of minority status. They require assistance to develop positive compensatory mechanisms to build individual and communal self-worth and to protect their unique identity and their institutions.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Jewish dimension in social work and mental health practice has long been an area of professional interest, often discussed at conferences and in the literature by considering specific component issues, e.g.:

- What does it mean to be a Jewish social worker?<sup>1</sup>
- What are the Jewish factors in the casework process?<sup>2</sup>
- Are special attitudes, knowledge and skills required for casework practice in a Jewish agency?<sup>3</sup>

- What justifications are there for continuing (and strengthening) an identifiable Jewish network of mental health and social service organizations?<sup>4</sup>

In recent years, interest in such questions has been restimulated by concern about the stability of the Jewish family, as intermarriage and assimilation have increased, only partially offset by growing ethnic pride, a search for Jewish roots, and attention by Jewish organizations to such questions as:

- Should professional staff members make use of Jewish values and concepts in dealing with clients?
- Should the needs of particular Jewish sub-groupings be given priority in the development of new programs?

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1. Morton I. Teicher, "On the Meaning of Being a Jewish Social Worker," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* XLVII: 3, (Spring 1969) pp. 191-195.

Norman Linzer "A Jewish Philosophy of Social Work Practice," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, LV: 4, (June 1979) pp. 309-312.

2. William Posner and Saul Hofstein, "The Use of the Agency's Jewishness in the Casework Process" *Jewish Social Service Quarterly* XXIV: 3, (March 1950) pp. 332-340.

Linzer, *op. cit.*, 313-314.

Pauline Goldberg, "Jewish Values in the Clinical Casework Process," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* LI: 13, (Spring 1975) pp. 270-279.

3. Saul Hofstein, "Preparation of Workers for Casework Practice in the Jewish Agency," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* XVI:2, (Winter 1968) pp. 156-164.

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Norman Linzer, ed., *Judaism and Mental Health—A Social Service Perspective*, New York: Board of Jewish Education of Greater N.Y., 1978, pp. 10-12.

4. Burton S. Rubin, "What's Jewish about Jewish Family Service?," *The Jewish Social Work Forum*, Vol. VI: 1, (Spring 1969), New York: Alumni Association, Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Yeshiva University, pp. 17-24.

Harriet Goldstein, "What's Jewish About Jewish Child Care?," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. 49: 4, (Summer 1973), pp. 309-312.

Marvin Wikler, "The Recent Rise of Professional Orthodox Jewish Social Services", *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, LV: 3, (March 1979), pp. 279-284.

• Should there be standards of Jewish knowledge for professionals who work in Jewish agencies?<sup>5</sup>

Most articles which have addressed these issues have indeed advanced Judaic/mental health theory and practice, but an integrating conceptual framework has not yet emerged. Similarly missing has been an examination of the relevance and impact of Jewish identification across the *range* of an agency's services and systems, and a model to initiate changes in policy and practice.

This article describes the conceptual basis and on-going process of how one family and children agency has addressed these issues.

#### THE AGENCY

The Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services Inc., was established in the late 1970's through the merger of the Jewish Board of Guardians, a pioneer in the residential treatment of emotionally disturbed youth, with the Jewish Family Service which played a major role in the development of family therapy.

After a period of reorganization, the JBFCS emerged as a comprehensive service agency for the Jewish and general communities of Greater New York City, providing residential, out-patient, day

treatment, preventive and social services for many individuals and families each year.

JBFCS receives *most* of its funding from the public sector, and is therefore mandated to deliver services on a non-sectarian basis. The agency also receives substantial assistance from the local UJA-Federation. It thereby accepts responsibility to serve the Jewish community particularly, addressing the needs of a most diverse Jewish clientele, including Jews of all shades of religious affiliation, from the very assimilated to Orthodox-Chassidic, and from a mutiplicity of Jewish ethnic sub-groupings, including Ashkenazim and Sephardim, Israelis, Russians and Iranians.<sup>6</sup>

#### THE PROJECT

In the Fall of 1982, the JBFCS established a Department of Religious Education as a collaborative effort between the agency, the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York, and UJA-Federation which provides the funding.

The program promotes and supports Jewish programming in the agency's work with families and individuals. It helps professional staff address Jewish issues in their work, and sensitizes them to the importance of positive Jewish identity and ties to the Jewish community as factors affecting mental health and social adjustment. The program also helps senior management and lay-leadership define how the agency will incorporate such awareness in its policies, programs and services.

In addition to creating an appropriate Jewish "ambiance" in JBFCS facilities to enhance the agency's identity as a Jewish communal institution, the Department oversees religious education for youngsters living in the agency's residential programs and for clients served by the Family Life Education Program.

5. Judith Lang, "The Changing Jewish Family and the Crisis of Values," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. LVI: 4, (Spring 1980) pp. 301-305.

Solomon Brownstein, "The Contemporary Jewish Family": Innovative Programming by Local Service Agencies, in *Serving the Jewish Family*, Gerald B. Bubis (ed.). Ktav Publishing House, Inc., New York: 1977, pp. 258-264.

Donald Feldstein, "What Do We Mean When We Say That Our Agencies Should Be More Jewish?" Paper delivered at a combined meeting of the Distribution and Communal Planning Committees, January 13, 1980, Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York.

Gerald Bubis, "The Jewish Component in Jewish Communal Service—From Theory to Practice," *Journal of Jewish Communal Services*, Vol. LVI: 3, (Spring 1980) p. 230.

6. Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services, *Directory of Services 1985-1986*, p. 3.

A Jewishly committed and knowledgeable *social worker* administers the program to insure that the agency's primary orientation as a mental health and social service organization is maintained, since a family and children's agency quite clearly has different "Jewish" goals and purposes from those of other community organizations such as a synagogue, Jewish school or community center. Thus, for example, questions about a client's Jewish identity and whether (s)he participates in Jewish cultural and religious activities stem from concern about group-identity, affiliation, and self-esteem, rather than from theological considerations.

#### METHOD

Mental health professionals know that efforts to implement change, especially in an emotionally charged area such as an agency's "Jewishness" must occur within a process which recognizes the strong feelings people have about existing systems. Individuals want to retain self-determined choice and a sense of being accepted and valued. This project therefore has neither an overt, nor hidden agenda to make staff or clients "more Jewish." Efforts have been directed rather, towards raising consciousness about a hitherto under-emphasized component of the agency's professional practice, and towards creating a climate in which individuals can choose change if they wish, within a process characterized by sensitivity, respect and concern.

An initial survey was taken among senior staff (executives, division directors, directors of residential treatment facilities) to determine their receptivity to such a program, and to learn about Jewish cultural and religious activities which were already in place. Orienting senior staff and soliciting their input and suggestions secured the cooperation of those upon whom the success of the program would ultimately depend and helped formulate specific goals for each agency facility and program.

As one might anticipate, the response of senior staff to this project has varied, ranging from those who feel the program was long overdue to those who candidly acknowledge their discomfort with its basic premises, questioning the appropriateness of such activity in a family and children's agency. Concern was also expressed that to orient and train line-workers to become more sensitive to culture and religion would add to an already overcrowded work schedule.

In almost all cases however, the Director's empathy towards feelings expressed by senior staff established initial trust, often leading them to share personal anecdotes about their own upbringing, and their current participation in Jewish life. Subsequent contacts with managerial and administrative staff reinforced the positive relationships established, enabling the Department of Religious Education to move towards accomplishment of its goals.

In this paper, it will obviously not be possible to detail the many issues and activities with which the Department has been involved to date. The author would like however, to share an overview of the experiences, and perhaps suggest tentative answers which have emerged from the work, to those perennial "Jewish-component" questions raised at the beginning of the paper.

#### ADMINISTRATION AND BOARD

One significant accomplishment of the JBFCs Department of Religious Education has been its contribution towards changes in the agency's self-concept as a Jewish communal institution. Although the two Jewish agencies which merged to form JBFCs were originally established to accommodate the particular needs of Jewish clients, some blurring of this commitment occurred during the years in which assimilation and "universalism" were the prevailing orientation of agency leadership; when the psychoanalytic and psychodynamic approaches (which seemed to promote a "value-free" stance) were embraced as the

prevailing treatment models, and especially, when the major sources of agency-funding shifted from the philanthropic to the public sector.

Promoting change in the agency's Jewish "identity," therefore, must begin with senior management and lay-leadership.

A director of Jewish education will necessarily participate in the agency's in-service training plans, its administrative and professional councils, its Utilization Review Committee, and on agency board activity and planning. His input into decisions about program and policy issues is a genuine, if informal, Jewish education opportunity, and can lead to a number of positive changes in the agency's sectarian commitment. Thus, for example, during the past few years, in the author's own agency, a number of new philanthropically funded programs were begun, targeted to particular Jewish groups, such as Russian Jewish adolescents, the Jewish homeless, chronically mentally ill Jews, and Orthodox Jewish pre-school children with learning disabilities. Decisions had to be made with the participation of the Director of Religious Education on many specifics from exclusive reliance on Kashruth, to holiday observance, to formal and informal educational, social, and therapeutic programming.

In a significant departure from past policy, JBFCS assumed responsibility for the care of a group of multiply disabled, severely retarded Chassidic children, and committed itself to maintain an Orthodox Jewish ambience within the residential milieu.

(The Department of Religious Education, because of its concern for ethnicity and religious practice in general, also advocates for the ethnic needs of non-Jewish clients of the agency in the provision of services, both directly and through referral when indicated.)

#### STAFF TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Enhancing awareness and skill of professional staff regarding the importance of

Jewish identity and Jewish values in individual and family adjustment and assisting professional staff to bring this awareness into their assessment and treatment activities has been a second priority area for the JBFCS Department of Religious Education. Numerous in-service training seminars have been held to provide professional and child-care staff with an opportunity to acquire knowledge of Jewish issues, and with a forum to discuss the implications of this knowledge for the work of the practitioner. "The Role of the Social Worker in a Jewish Agency," "Working with Holocaust Survivors," "Jewish Values in Marriage, Divorce and Sexuality," "Serving the Orthodox Client," "Working with Members of Cults and Their Families," are some of the many courses and seminars which have been offered.

Of particular interest has been a seminar which considers the human life-cycle from a developmental perspective, considering life's major milestones from the points of view of mental health theory and Jewish tradition. Taught jointly by a specialist in child and family development from the agency's staff and a professor of religious philosophy from the Jewish Theological Seminary, the course sensitizes staff to the variety of ways in which a client's background and current life-experiences may be conceptualized.

A practice-oriented seminar entitled "Ethnicity in Mental Health Practice" helps workers sharpen their skills in addressing the particular needs of clients from different cultural backgrounds, including the variety of Jewish sub-groupings.

Primary emphasis in such educational opportunities for staff has been to make the connection between the theoretical information presented, and its practical implications in work with clients. Becoming familiar with the variety of Jewish cultural groups, their religious identity, values, and communal needs enables workers to serve such clients with greater empathy and competence. Thus for example, a

worker does not have to *personally* agree that obtaining a *Get* (Jewish divorce) is desirable when Jews divorce. (S)he *does* have a professional obligation to provide clients with basic information about this procedure, and discuss, in a supportive and non-judgmental manner, the consequences of obtaining a *Get* or of remarriage without one.<sup>7</sup>

#### CONSULTATION TO AGENCY PROGRAMS

A third major area of involvement for the Department of Religious Education has been to offer consultation in conferences and meetings with staff members in the agency's out-patient clinics regarding a wide range of Jewish issues where they have impact on case planning and treatment. Requests for assistance have included arranging for the Bar Mitzvah of an emotionally disabled child, providing sex therapy for an Orthodox couple within the requirements of Jewish Law, assisting with funeral arrangements for an indigent Jewish family whose child succumbed to a fatal illness, and assisting a Jewish woman regain custody of her child who had been converted to another religion, while living with her former (non-Jewish) husband.

A comprehensive Jewish education program has been developed in the agency's residential treatment programs to enhance cultural and religious identity, and provide youngsters with opportunities for participation in Jewish activities such as formal classes, rap-groups, trips to Jewish cultural events and institutions, etc. This serves a rehabilitative function in addition to promoting religious and cultural affiliation. Dissatisfaction with the previous model of Jewish activities in the agency's residential facilities which defined the religious educator as a "chaplain," led to the conviction that an alternative approach

was indicated. Following Goldman,<sup>8</sup> the Jewish educator is now seen as an integral member of the clinical and child-care team. Emphasis is placed on the *relationship* which develops between the Jewish educator and the children in residence, and the treatment goals which are facilitated by youngster's participation in the program, rather than on a particular curriculum or doctrine.

A primary goal is to help each Jewish youngster acquire a sense of his or her uniqueness and special worth as a Jewish person and to develop an integration of cultural and religious distinctiveness and accommodation with the greater society. Inculcating Jewish values, celebration of Jewish holidays and formal preparation for Bar or Bas Mitzvah are used to strengthen Jewish identity as it relates to the concerns of residential treatment, and not primarily from a religious perspective, or concern for Jewish continuity *per se*.

While our approach to Jewish education for youngsters in residence varies in accordance with their intellectual capacities and diagnostic considerations, participation in interfaith religious activities is discouraged for children with emotional problems, since this dilutes cultural and religious identity and does not allow youngsters to experience the uniqueness of their particular heritage. (Religious education is, of course, equally important for non-Jewish children, and is approached in the same way as for the Jewish youngsters from the perspective of their own faith and heritage.)

The following case example illustrates the above process:

Steven, a sixteen-year-old student at one of the agency's residential treatment centers shows severe emotional and educational deficits. He has few positive attachments with peers or male adults.

Due to his negative feelings about Jews

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7. Bruce Karp, "Training for the Jewish in Jewish Family Life Education," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. 61, p. 1, (Fall 1984) p. 73.

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8. Rabbi Sincha Goldman, "Strengthening Jewish Identity in a Residential Setting," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. LIII: 2, (Winter 1976), pp. 165-169.

and Judaism, Steven's participation in Jewish activities was minimal prior to his introduction to the Jewish Studies Group. Based on the relationship he developed with Mr. R., the group leader, Steven began to participate actively in the program, and despite his "advanced" age, decided to prepare for his Bar Mitzvah.

Steven's successful performance at his Bar Mitzvah enhanced his ability to handle other stressful social situations. The Jewish education he received in the program helped him with his self-image and Jewish identity. When Steven was subsequently given an "aliyah" at the Bar Mitzvah of another resident, he said to a staff member: "Today I really know I am Jewish."

Perhaps the most important result of Steven's participation in the Jewish activities program is the positive relationship he has developed with a male staff member.

The Jewish Education staff consults regularly with the therapeutic team in an effort to help Steven further develop his social skills.

(Case vignette provided by Mr. Charles Rosenthal.)

#### DIRECT SERVICES

In addition to consultative and training activities, the Department of Religious Education provides a number of direct services to agency clients, to staff and professional colleagues in the Jewish community.

The Department has produced a number of pamphlets and brochures which discuss Jewish holidays and customs from the perspective of the family and children's agency. These materials convey information about Jewish celebrations in ways which acknowledge Jewish denominational differences, yet retain a basic consonance with the Jewish historical mainstream. Thus, while describing traditional Jewish holiday observances and suggesting their contemporary relevance, the brochures are written from a non-judgmental perspective, which leaves the decision about actual participation to the individual reading them.

In a similar vein, a Judaica section has been developed in the agency's central

library which enables staff to obtain information about Jewish issues as they relate to mental health and social service practice from a variety of viewpoints. Professionals are thereby helped to relate to the concerns of the agency's most varied Jewish clientele.

The Department of Religious Education is the agency "address" for inquiries from clients and staff seeking information about things Jewish. Extensive files on Jewish communal resources are maintained, which enable the Department to accommodate requests for assistance.

The Director of Religious Education, a trained mental health practitioner, is often called upon to respond directly to requests for help with problems which overlap the mental health and religious areas. The following case vignettes illustrate typical situations in which religion and pathology are thoroughly enmeshed in the presenting concerns:

Mrs. H. contacted the agency to inquire whether she is "permitted" to make a Chanukah celebration for her grandchildren, even though their mother does not wish her to do so.

Mrs. H.'s son married a non-Jewish woman, and they both became members of an Oriental religious community. Mrs. H.'s married daughter brings her children to the H. home for family celebrations on Jewish holidays. Mrs. H. and her husband feel they would like to include their son's children in their gift-giving, along with their daughter's children.

In the course of the lengthy interview, some of the many strands of the above situation were explored with Mrs. H.—her anger at her son for marrying out of the faith, the blame she receives from her husband, the hostility she experiences from her daughter-in-law, and the ambivalence she feels toward her "non-Jewish" grandchildren. Mrs. H. connected the anger and resentment she feels towards her husband, son and daughter-in-law and her guilt with her desire to push her son's children into Jewish activities against the wishes of their mother.

Among the suggestions and options offered to Mrs. H. were the opportunity to participate in a Jewish Family Life Education group for the parents of inter-married couples; referral to the agency's counseling services for family meetings between herself, her husband, her son and his wife; individual counseling for her to work through some of her conflicted feelings and to clarify her role as a grandmother in this situation.

In the following case example, the Director more assertively tried to arrange for the client to be seen at one of the agency's treatment clinics because of the pathological concerns which emerged from the applicant's presenting request:

Ms. C., age 29, called to obtain the address of a ritualarium—which she thinks is called a "mink-va." Upon inquiry, it turns out that Ms. C. is not Jewish, but has read in the Bible that a woman must immerse herself in "living-waters" after completing menstruation. She has been doing this in rivers and in the ocean, but now feels she is ready to try the "real thing."

Ms. C. further shared that she experiences strong feelings of guilt and "uncleanliness" because she has engaged in sexual relations though not married. Worried that she may not be on the correct spiritual path, she thought she might want to convert to Judaism, but is not really sure.

Worker empathized with Ms. C.'s feelings of confusion and the difficulty she is experiencing. After inquiring as to whether she had sought the assistance of a clergyman from her own faith (or a rabbi) to discuss her religious ambivalence, the client was initially encouraged to do so.

Clarification was offered to Ms. C. that a non-Jewish woman's attendance at a *mikvah* does not result in ritual purification, and that for her to do so might prove embarrassing because she lacked familiarity with the procedures required prior to immersion.

Worker more assertively encouraged Ms. C. to be seen at one of the agency's outpatient counseling offices when she revealed that—as part of her cleansing ritual—she has been killing two birds each month as a sacrificial sin-offering, and experiences very

strong feelings of guilt about her sexual activity which she often feels unable to control.

The above case examples illustrate the kinds of Judaic/mental health concerns which are brought to the attention of a family and children's agency. The availability of a professional trained to respond to such issues constitutes an important agency service to the Jewish community.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have described the rationale for, and some of the experiences of, the JBFCS Department of Religious Education, a program which enhances the ability of the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services to define and implement the Jewish component of its work, at a time when growing segments of the American Jewish community are showing a greater interest in cultural and religious affiliation, after more than a century of struggle with modernity and assimilation.<sup>9</sup>

The Department has successfully infused a feeling of Jewishness into the agency's ambiance and services, in ways which enhance its primary function as a provider of mental health and social services.

Although there are some who may still remain unconvinced that attention to cultural and religious issues should be part of the formal structure of a family and children's service, the agency itself is committed to strengthening Jewish identity and to making use of Jewish concepts in its work—all the more so when such use is appropriately relevant to its functional goals.

Historically, Jews have been particularly vulnerable to the discriminatory repercussions of minority status. They require assistance to develop positive compensatory mechanisms to build individual and

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9. Bertram H. Gold, "The Jewish Community on the Move—From Immigration to Reaffirmation," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. 59, p. 1, (Fall 1982), pp. 6-7.

communal self-worth and to protect their unique identity and their institutions. While a great deal remains to be done with regard to the Jewish component questions raised at the beginning of this paper, the JBFCS Department of Religious Education has created a conceptual framework and a structure in which such issues can be appropriately considered within the professional social work agency. The gap between a moralistic, pre-scientific understanding of psychosocial disorders and their remediation, and the drawbacks of a "value-free" approach to human development, socialization and treatment, (which often fails to address human needs

for ethnic identity and an existential connection) has been narrowed significantly.

A Department of Religious Education operating within a multi-service family and children's agency is an important step towards reintegrating the variety of educational and rehabilitation disciplines implied in the Hebrew term "chinuch"—usually translated as "education," but which more accurately connotes a combination of "education," "therapy," "refinement of character," "behavior modification" and "self-actualization." It thus moves us closer to the goal of finding current solutions to the age-old problem of becoming Jewish human beings.