

# ELEVATING THE STATUS OF THE JEWISH COMMUNAL PROFESSIONAL

DR. WALLACE GREENE

*Director, Jewish Educational Services, Metrowest, New Jersey*

*Since Talmudic times, Jewish communal service has been understood to be an equally distinguished calling as those who devote themselves exclusively to study. Yet, too often the Jewish community does not value Jewish communal professionals the same way it values other professionals. If communities are to thrive, this inequity must end.*

In the Jewish tradition, as in other cultures, humankind is to imitate the ways of God, *imatatio Dei*. As God takes care of His creatures and sees to their needs, so too must we do likewise.

Other than Priests and Levites who were religious functionaries in Temple times, Judaism does not view as necessary or desirable a special cadre of "professionals" to deal with the educational, social, and common needs of the community. The ideal was for every Jew to have both an occupation and an avocational expertise in Jewish texts and practices. In addition, it was assumed that Jews would take care of their brethren whenever necessary. The poor would be fed and clothed, students would study with those who were acknowledged as masters, prayer services would be conducted, cases adjudicated, deeds recorded, money loaned, weddings and funerals collected, meat slaughtered, and the like. All of these tasks would be performed by an educated laity.

For a while this system worked, in some areas well into medieval times. In the Talmud every scholar had a profession. Most were middle-class workers, some were wealthy land owners or investors, and some were poor, but they all worked and had a special skill. Those who were wealthy had more time for study. Most worked to provide for their families, and the balance of their time was spent in the yeshiva.

In any society there are always individuals whose abilities make them stand out. Whenever such an exceptional individual was needed

to perform a vital service such as serving as a judge, teaching, or supervising divorce documents, it was customary to pay him for his time away from his job. This was called *s'khar batala*, compensation based on what he would have earned had he been at his regular job. Nevertheless, the Talmud cautions those with special talents or skills from capitalizing on them: "Scholarship is fine, as long as you have an occupation" and "Don't use your knowledge for profit" (literally, as a spade with which to dig; *Pirkei Avot* 2:2 and 4:7). This was the ideal.<sup>1</sup>

However, society had a need for individuals who could devote themselves full-time to communal service. The Talmud in fact endorses the notion that one should involve himself in the needs of the community and not rely on others. Thus was born the professional communal worker.<sup>2</sup>

Maimonides compares those who are inspired to enter communal service to the Priests and Levites. "Not only the Levites [are to be supported by the community], but any individual at all whose passion is for [communal] service, ought to be relieved of the pressures of wage earning because of this elevated calling... and should be provided with a proper remuneration like the Priests and Levites" (*Mishneh Torah* 13:13).

The Jewish community valued the services rendered by those who devoted themselves

<sup>1</sup>See Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg, *Responsa Tzitz Eliezer* (Jerusalem, 1999) XI:11: "Currently, communal workers receive a monthly salary for dedicating themselves completely to communal needs. This is *s'khar batala* since it is impossible to support themselves otherwise."

<sup>2</sup>See *T.B. Ta'anit* 11a for a discussion about Moses's communal involvement as a paradigm.

Paper was presented at the 2001 meeting of the New Jersey Association of Jewish Communal Service.

completely to the study and teaching of Talmud. As early as the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Rabbenu Gershom of Mainz, Germany ruled that such scholars were entitled to a monopoly (*ma'arufia*) in a certain business in order to provide an income (Agus, 1968). This concept was maintained until modern times. Even the I.R.S. extends certain courtesies to the clergy.

Even in Talmudic times it was understood that communal service was a calling as distinguished as devoting oneself exclusively to study. "Rabbi Jeremiah said: He who occupies himself with the affairs of the community is as one who studies the Law" (Berachot 5:1:8d).

Today, the traditional and well-nigh universal drive to become a talmudic scholar has been replaced by the passionate pursuit of *tikkun olam*, making the world a better place. Keeping in mind Rabbi Jeremiah's dictum equating Talmud study and Jewish communal service, all Jewish communal workers deserve respect. And in the words of Maimonides, they deserve *proper remuneration*.

Jewish agencies must operate according to Jewish values. Jewish values do not mean merely the accepted concept of helping the downtrodden. There are core Jewish values that speak to the issue of how one treats Jewish communal workers.

There is a vast literature on Jewish labor relations and business ethics, and lay leaders need to study these sources. The teachings of the Torah must inform all aspects of hiring, compensation, benefits, work environment, and severance. Staff manuals and contracts need to be "Jewish." If Jewish tradition is not part of the way that Jewish communal workers are treated, then any such lay-professional discussion is labeled "a session of scorners" (*Pirkei Avot* 3:2).

Jewish communal professionals deserve status, honor, and respect. Parents should be proud when their child wants to enter the field. Using the Talmudic model of compensating someone for what they could have earned on the "outside," salaries need to be highly competitive since Jewish communal professionals have to live "inside" the Jewish community, and it is expensive to live as a committed Jew. Day school tuition, JCC and synagogue mem-

bership, summer camp, legal services, insurance, pension plans, and day care should either be included as benefits, or made possible by a competitive salary.

Today's Jewish communal professional is highly trained, exceptionally motivated, passionate, competent, and creative. Yet the Jewish community does not value their services in the same way it values other professionals.

For example, professional head of a major Jewish communal organization was invited to be the guest speaker at the dedication ceremony of a new federation campus. On the day of the dedication, the sidewalk cement has just been poured, and there were signs to avoid this area and enter from the rear of the building. However, the speaker's plane was delayed and he pulled up in a cab at the last minute and dashed into the building, tracking cement onto the new carpet and leaving his footprints in the sidewalk.

The lay chairperson was furious! He verbally pummeled the professional publicly, totally humiliating him. Another lay leader was shocked at this behavior and said to the chairman, "How can you treat him this way? You have to respect those who work on our behalf. You know how important his job is." Whereupon the chairman replied, "I respect Jewish communal professionals in the abstract, not in the concrete!"

Here's something concrete to consider. Most labor-management disputes are adversarial. That is why employee progress is usually achieved by organizing into unions that utilize collective bargaining, work stoppages, and strikes to achieve their goals.

The lay leadership of the Jewish community and the professional staff that runs their organizations and agencies have a united goal and agenda. This commonality of purpose should lead to an amicable partnership. Partners treat each other equitably.

#### REFERENCE

- Agus, Irving. (1968). *Urban civilization in pre-Crusade Europe*. New York: Yeshiva University Press.