

## YOUNG PROFESSIONALS

### Helping Shape the Field of Jewish Communal Service

JENNIFER ROSENBERG

*Planning Executive, Jewish Continuity Commission, UJA-Federation of New York*

*In this article, a young professional reflects on the field of Jewish communal service, the contribution made by young professionals and the challenge and opportunities that must be addressed to keep our organizations and communities vibrant and dynamic.*

The field of Jewish communal service has changed significantly over the past several years, in no small part due to the contributions of young professionals who have chosen communal service as their career. With each generation, the profession is enriched by new energy, fresh perspectives, and a diversity of background and experience. In this article, as I reflect on the state of the field based on my experiences to date as a Jewish communal professional, I examine the contributions of young professionals as they face the opportunities and challenges that lie before us.

#### **THE AGE-OLD DEBATE: HOW JEWISH IS JEWISH COMMUNAL SERVICE?**

Much has been written about the dramatic increase over the past decade in funding and programming for Jewish education and continuity. At the same time, the traditional arenas of Jewish communal service—social work services, rescue and resettlement, support for Israel, and community relations—continue in force. But even many of these organizations are now placing increased emphasis on what is “Jewish” about their activities and how Jewish commitment and engagement can be expressed and strengthened through their spheres of activity.

This change has occurred despite much ambivalence and even resistance (Jick, 1999). From the earliest years when Jewish social work was becoming a profession, the organized Jewish community has struggled with how Jewish the field should be.

The recent increased emphasis on Jewish content in Jewish communal service is due to several factors: the popularity of ethnicity in American culture, the reaction to alarming statistics about assimilation and intermarriage, and an increased focus on domestic issues as fewer Jews are perceived to be at risk worldwide and as many Jews express complacency or are disillusioned by a militarily strong but politically and religiously divided State of Israel. Yet another crucial element enabling such a shift is a greater openness to such change on the part of lay and professional leadership.

Today, many young professionals choose to go into Jewish communal service to act on and share their enthusiasm for Jewish values. More are also entering the field with undergraduate and/or graduate coursework in Jewish studies. At the same time, more Jewish organizations are seeking candidates with a degree in Jewish communal service or with joint training in Jewish studies and other professional disciplines. As Susan L. Shevitz, director of the Hornstein Program in Jewish Communal Service, notes, “Today the Jewish community expects the synthesis of professional and Judaic competence from its professionals” (1998/99, p. 124). While the debate about the Jewishness of Jewish communal work is far from over, there has been a discernible shift.

---

Jennifer Rosenberg was the 1995 recipient of the Jewish Communal Service Association Louis Kraft Award, and a 1994 graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America/Columbia University School of Social Work Dual Degree Masters Program in Social Work and Jewish Studies.

## EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR JEWISH COMMUNAL PROFESSIONALS

As a result, this is an exciting time to be a young professional in the organized Jewish community. The field is expanding, and there are a tremendous variety of jobs available. Two seemingly contradictory trends in the general American voluntary sector contribute to this expansion of opportunity. On the one hand, there has been a surge in the number of nonprofit organizations—the registration rates for new non-profit firms have been very high in recent years. On the other hand, some studies suggest an overall decline in rates of involvement and volunteerism in civic, recreational, educational, and religious organizations (Putnam, 1995).

How do these trends manifest themselves in the organized Jewish community and how do they affect opportunities for professionals? First, there is an expansion in the number and types of Jewish organizations. While some of the older Jewish fraternal associations are struggling to survive, most of the traditional arenas of Jewish communal service are still very active. At the same time, new enterprises such as family foundations and creative outreach programs to promote a Jewish renaissance are becoming more common.

This expansion of activity is counterbalanced by a decline in volunteerism. This drop in volunteerism, combined with a decline in Jewish literacy, has led to increased reliance on and thus opportunities for Jewish communal professionals.

For the professional, these opposing trends are a double-edged sword. Gone are the days (if they ever existed) when the professional was simply a functionary of the board, carrying out its directives. Today there are greater opportunities and demands on professionals to play an active role in the development of policy and the education of lay leadership. There is a greater respect for the skills and knowledge that the professional brings to her or his work.

But the Jewish communal world is founded

as a partnership. When either partner is not bringing its full potential to the table, or is not drawing out the full capabilities of its counterpart, the whole community suffers. While professionals play an important role in gathering information and developing methodologies to help organizations achieve their goals, these goals cannot be achieved if volunteers do not also take an active role in the planning and implementation of initiatives. The problem is due not only to ambivalence or indifference on the part of lay leaders. We professionals are sometimes guilty of taking on so much of the responsibility ourselves that we do not provide substantive, meaningful ways for lay leadership to participate. Lay leaders have no sense of investment or reward if all the work is done in the office and they just serve as a rubber stamp. Equalizing the lay-professional partnership continues to pose a challenge that we must actively grapple with if we are to succeed in our communal enterprise.

Some lay leaders and Jewish communal professionals are responding to this challenge in a way that is further expanding the number and types of Jewish organizations. I sense that there is an ironic link between this trend and some of the sociological factors that have accompanied the weakening of Jewish identity. American Jews today are more affluent, have higher levels of professional achievement, and are integrated more strongly into the larger society than earlier generations. The common assumption is that these factors tend to lead to a decline in Jewish identity, but a recent study by Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen (1998) suggests a more complex relationship with Judaism and the Jewish community among the moderately affiliated. Although the subjects of the study “demonstrated enduring ambivalence towards the organizations, institutions, commitments and norms which constitute Jewish life,” Cohen and Eisen also found that “the quest for Jewish meaning is extremely important to our subjects.” The authors of the study further stress that indifference is not the problem with this group—“they have strong feelings

about Judaism and Jewish institutions, both positive and negative" (1998, pp. 5-7).

This combination of affluence, Jewish identity that is more personal, and ambivalence toward existing Jewish institutions places us at an interesting crossroads. Mainstream traditional organizations, such as federations, Jewish Community Centers, and even synagogues, face challenges, as those who search for meaning and fulfillment do not find it in the usual board room, auditorium, or sanctuary. These organizations have seen some decline in participation and giving, although the strong economy has mitigated this trend somewhat. In the meantime, overall giving to Jewish causes is up considerably. It seems that more people are acting on their personal interests and convictions, directing increasing amounts of dollars through "entrepreneurial philanthropy" to a variety of innovative programs.

The Jewish Life Network (JLN), led by Michael Steinhardt and Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, is one such private foundation; its mission is "to create new institutions and initiatives to enrich the religious, cultural and institutional life of American Jewry." One of its projects combines the vision and initial financial backing of the foundation with the talent, enthusiasm, and creativity of a cadre of young professionals to reach out in new ways to young moderately affiliated and unaffiliated Jews. Under the stewardship of the Creative and Rabbinic Director, Rabbi David Gedzelman, "The Partnership for Jewish Life: A Community of New Yorkers in their 20s and 30s" has created an actors and playwrights network and Jewish "poetry slams" to reach out to the unaffiliated, and brings together Jewish communal professionals with people in the arts and performing arts to learn together in an internship. The Partnership has just opened a facility ("Makor") with state-of-the-art film editing and screening rooms, a theater cafe, and classrooms.

We are living in a time that is ripe for such innovation. In this environment, it seems that young professionals with vision, drive,

and the right connections can achieve almost anything.

Private foundations are the source of much creativity and can greatly enrich the Jewish community. Yet, they also pose a serious challenge to existing institutions. Supporting ongoing programs that address basic communal needs is not as exciting and as attractive as creating new initiatives. There can be a tendency to forget the still vulnerable among us who require concrete human services delivered in a Jewish context. It is important that resources continue to flow to established institutions that have proven their effectiveness in addressing Jewish communal needs. We must not get into an "either/or" situation: Both established and novel programs have important things to contribute to the Jewish community and to each other. It is the challenge of our generation to enable the mainstream, established enterprises and these innovative new ventures to work *together* to meet basic needs and enrich our Jewish lives.

#### YOUNG PROFESSIONALS' CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FIELD

Who are the young professionals entering the field, and what are they contributing to it? Anecdotal evidence suggests that those who choose to go into Jewish communal service do so out of a sense of passion or calling. With so many other more lucrative career opportunities available, generally a personal motivation or inspiration steers them in this direction. It may be a love of Judaism, a commitment to the Jewish people, an interest in helping others, a feeling of communal responsibility, or a desire for meaningful work.

There seem to be two types of professionals entering the field. The first are those, mostly young people, who have formal professional training in Jewish communal service. Graduate programs in Jewish communal service have now been training young professionals for thirty years, with well over a thousand alumni to date. New programs are emerging, primarily through the addition of new, specialized tracks. For example, He-

brew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion offers programs that combine Jewish communal service with masters degrees in social work, public administration, business administration, communications management, gerontology, Jewish education, and Jewish studies, with specialization available in synagogue management and youth services. Other partnerships are emerging with field placements as well; for example, a new internship program in social work and informal education being launched by The Jewish Theological Seminary's dual degree program in conjunction with Ramah Camps. The diversity of these joint programs does not seem to be diluting the discipline of Jewish communal service. If anything, it increases the richness of the field, examining how Jewish values can be applied to different disciplines and how the strengths of these disciplines can be used to address communal needs more effectively.

The second group of professionals entering Jewish communal work are those who trained in other fields and then came to work for the Jewish community. These "second career" professionals often come to Jewish communal organizations in order to direct their talents to areas they find personally more meaningful.

All this diversity—from the newly trained professionals and the "second careerists" who combine different types of training with Jewish communal service—has the potential to greatly enrich the field. Using a variety of professional approaches in combination enables issues to be examined in greater depth and from different perspectives. New tools of analysis can be applied to old problems to come up with creative solutions.

One question is whether this diversity will lead to greater "seamlessness." With people of different backgrounds and functions working together in common cause, the whole Jewish communal system should flow more smoothly and cohesively. Yet, there is also the risk that the different disciplines will not intersect well and will have difficulty coming together in a common mission.

Too often, people working in different organizations do not fully see themselves as working together for a common purpose. Because each institution is often struggling for its own survival, they sometimes do not recognize that promoting their counterparts' interests will have positive ramifications for themselves and the community as a whole.

Similarly, even people working in different parts of the same organization do not always capitalize on opportunities for collaboration. In Jewish federations, for example, fund raisers and planners too often lose sight of how their work relates to that of their counterparts and how they can serve as resources to one another. One side "re-creates the wheel," being unaware of the information and relationships that the other has already established. New models of partnering and improving communication are constantly being created to address this issue, but achieving collaboration continues to be an ongoing struggle.

Some of these patterns have been long established. For example, when I was a graduate student, I was surprised that there were no seminars to bring together all the students training to be Jewish communal professionals—students in rabbinical and cantorial school, Jewish education, and the dual-degree social work program. While each discipline has its own approach, we all could have been enriched by looking at some of these issues together and seeing how our work could complement the others.

Yet, there are now some exciting models of collaboration. In the Wexner Graduate Fellowship Program, its fellows in every area of professional training gather together twice a year for four years for intensive leadership training institutes in which they examine different issues in Jewish professional life. Alumni continue to meet yearly thereafter for continued professional exchange and development.

Other young Jewish professionals are beginning to organize similar opportunities to bring diverse Jewish communal professionals together and to further their own profes-

sional growth. One such approach is the Jewish Communal Professionals of Chicago (JCPC). Through the vision and efforts of Ann Hartman Luban, a graduate of the HUC/USC dual degree program, the JCPC was founded to create professional development and networking opportunities for young professionals within their first ten years in Jewish communal service. They now have several hundred Jewish communal professionals on their mailing list, hold regular programs organized by a committee of volunteers, and attract people from the full breadth of Jewish communal organizations.

Similarly, young people have come together within the framework of the Association of Jewish Community Organization Personnel (AJCOP) to organize Young Professional Networks on a regional basis. This year, they have organized conferences in the Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, and South Florida regions, bringing together people from different parts of the field to delve into such subjects as supervision and mentorship, career advancement, organizational change, and the challenges and opportunities facing the field.

Such opportunities for networking ought to exist in both large and small communities. However, the success of such networks depends largely on whether there are a few people with the vision and commitment to make them work. From my experience, it seems that in smaller communities one is more likely to know one's professional counterparts personally and to work with them in different contexts, but there are fewer resources and opportunities for ongoing networking and training. In larger communities, conferences and meetings of professional organizations are more accessible, but it is often mainly staff at the executive level who are aware of or take advantage of these programs. In both cases, it is still the minority of people who join the Jewish Communal Service Association or its affiliated professional associations or who identify beyond their

position and organization with a larger, cohesive Jewish communal field.

While young professionals are bringing energy, enthusiasm, and dedication to their practice of Jewish communal service, there is a great need to create incentives to keep them in the field. Burnout rates and turnover are still high. Opportunities for growth are often limited, unless one is willing to relocate to a new community. While salaries may be better than they were in the past, they still do not compare with those of the private sector, and many professionals leave Jewish communal service because other not-for-profit or private sector organizations can give them greater remuneration and security. I also often hear frustration with the lack of recognition. No matter what accomplishments are achieved, community members tend to be most vocal about ongoing frustrations that challenge the community. It takes vision and strength to be able to see incremental progress, communicate it, and keep going despite the many challenges.

Having worked as a Jewish communal professional for under ten years, I remain optimistic about the future. The field of Jewish communal service continues to evolve, with expanded opportunities, greater diversity, increased professionalism, and overall growth. To sustain the vitality of our communities, there needs to be more dynamic exchange and cooperation between the traditional, established institutions of Jewish life and the innovative, emerging models. Jewish communal professionals from different disciplines and different types of Jewish organizations also need to come together more to look at the common challenges we face and address them with a greater degree of coordination. Both experienced and new professionals have to take the initiative to look beyond their immediate tasks and responsibilities, so they can enrich both themselves and the field at large. In that way, we can attract and retain talented young professionals who will have a lasting impact on the Jewish communal world.

REFERENCES

- Cohen, Steven M., & Eisen, Arnold M. (1998). *The Jews within: Self, community and commitment among the variety of moderately affiliated*. Boston—Los Angeles: The Susan & David Wilstein Institute Jewish Policy Studies.
- Green, Arthur. (1996). *Restoring the aleph: Judaism for the contemporary seeker*. New York: Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education.
- Jick, Leon A. (1998/99, Winter/Spring). The transformation of Jewish social work: Bernard Reisman and the Hornstein Program at Brandeis University. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 75(2/3), 114–120.
- Shevitz, Susan L. (1998/99, Winter/Spring). Continuity and change: The Hornstein Program's approach to educating Jewish communal professionals. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 75(2/3), 121–130.
- Putnam, Robert D. (January, 1995). Bowling alone: America's declining social capital. *Journal of Democracy*, 6(1).

IN HONOR OF OUR MENTORS AT HUC

JUDAH SHAPIRO Z" L

GERALD B. BUBIS

FERNE KATLEMAN

FROM

ALAN S. ENGEL

RABBI STEPHEN L. FUCHS

IRVING L. GINSBERG

CHARLES R. SCHIFFMAN

WILLIAM R. SCHWARTZ

GERSON SILVER

LOUIS B. SOLOMON

JOKIE SOLOMON

RABBI MARK N. STAITMAN

PETER H. WELLS