

LAY LEADERSHIP AND JEWISH IDENTITY

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Jewish lay leadership activity does not convey nor transmit a strong Jewish commitment to the next generation. Therefore, our professional goals in working with lay leaders must go beyond the assignment of tasks to a greater emphasis on Jewish education and ideology. Encouraging collateral activity—Jewish observance and study—will maximize the personal impact of community service and give it sustaining power.

Editor's Note: Although this article was not written in response to the 1990 CJF National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), it presents a new model of working with lay leadership that emphasizes Jewish continuity—one of the major concerns of the NJPS.

THE CHALLENGE

There is the assumption within the Jewish communal field that lay leadership involvement in behalf of Jewish causes or institutions inherently fosters a stronger Jewish identification, which in turn contributes to Jewish continuity. It is widely believed that a lay leader who is involved in a federation campaign, a family service board, or a Jewish Community Center program contributes not only to the goals of the agency but is her- or himself transformed, in the process, experientially, into a more deeply dedicated Jew. Within the Jewish communal profession, it is reasonable to assume that Jewish voluntary and philanthropic activity affects positively one's Jewish self-image as lay leaders take pride in their developing portfolio of good Jewish deeds. The agencies, in turn, pridefully cite the results of lay leadership involvement in establishing policies, erecting buildings, and raising funds for Israel and local needs while also trumpeting the salutary impact of this involvement on Jewish continuity and survival. In a sense, the impact on Jewish survival becomes a byproduct of Jewish lay leadership activity. It should be

clear, however, that the achievement of agency goals, be they service or fund raising, is pre-eminent and the Jewish enrichment that accrues to the lay leader is secondary. The challenge to the Jewish communal profession is not to reverse the priorities, but to find ways to strengthen the secondary outcome so that its impact will be more meaningful and enduring.

On a communal level, the voluntary and philanthropic activities of lay leaders elevate the spiritual content and character of the community. These leaders are exemplars of Jewish values, embodying the mitzvot of *chesed* and *tzedekah*. They inspire a sense of peoplehood and perpetuate the concept of *kehillah* in keeping with the Jewish tradition of creating a caring and compassionate community. On a personal level, however, there is little evidence to suggest that the Jewish enrichment experienced by lay leaders in the course of voluntary activity has an impact to any significant degree on their children or the next generation. In his report to the Jewish Outreach Institute on the results of a mail survey to 8,000 American Jewish leaders and in other documentation, Egon Mayer (1991) suggests that the intermarriage rate of the children of lay leaders mirrors that of the general Jewish public, which is well over 50%. Steven Cohen (1989) similarly documents a high incidence of intermarriage among children of board members of national Jewish organizations. Clearly, we cannot assume that Jewish philanthropic or voluntary activity diminishes the pro-

blem of intermarriage in either personal attitudes or actual experience. Further, there is no indication of any trend toward greater spiritual involvement, ritual practice, or synagogue affiliation among young adult children of lay leadership. Were such a study of the children to be undertaken, one might be shocked to discover the results. In a study conducted of young Jewish executives in New York, we learn that in many cases, the family tradition of philanthropy is not passed on because of hostile attitudes held by the younger generation toward the Jewish establishment (Mayer, 1991).

It appears reasonable to postulate that Jewish lay leadership activity does not, in and of itself and to any significant degree, convey the kind of Jewish commitment that inspirationally and paradigmatically is transferred to the next generation. Consequently, it behooves the Jewish communal profession to harness its enthusiasm in its proclamations about Jewish survival and to consider why lay leadership activity is not Jewishly transmissive and what we can do about it.

THE ISSUE

To understand the apparent lack of perpetuity in the Jewishness experienced by lay leadership, it is important to consider the issue of expectations. The expectation conveyed to a layperson in the assumption of a leadership role is that he or she will help achieve certain results for the agency. No collateral expectations are enunciated. In the execution of the task, there is the implication that the lay leader will be performing an important mitzvah, supporting and enhancing Jewish life, expressing her- or himself Jewishly, and perhaps even experiencing some personal renewal. Involvement, however, is essentially task oriented, and personal enrichment is expected to accrue experientially. No specific outcomes are spelled out in terms of personal convictions, spirituality, or lifestyle. This is, of course, understandable in view of Jewish communal service's commitment

to the principles of self-determination and pluralism. We do not sermonize nor convey an ideology beyond certain universal convictions about community enhancement, support for Israel, and *tikkun olam*. We make no ideological demands. Our pluralistic mentality has taught us to be ever accepting as long as the universal objectives are satisfied. What happens to individual leaders in the process is important, but is also existential in the sense that their Jewishness is achieved and defined by their activity. In other words, the doing becomes the ideology.

True, Judaism is a religion of deed more so than creed. Yet, the deed is ultimately expected to lead to creed so that others can be brought into the sphere of doing and believing. When this does not happen, it becomes difficult to reconcile proclamations about enhancing Jewish survival with the apparent failure of that activity to influence the next generation.

Eugene Borowitz (1990) makes a compelling argument in support of ideology to ensure survival. He notes that ethnicity became trendy and the "melting pot" gave way to pluralism in the 1960s, allowing us to be "more Jewish," to display our Jewishness visibly, and to demonstrate for it. Yet, the American infatuation with things ethnic has passed. Borowitz also notes that Israel is no longer the primary source of identification. The manifest cause of our disaffection is the no-longer bridgable gap between the mythic and the real state of Israel. The trajectory of our mass disillusionment runs from the massacres at Sabra and Shatila through the *Intifada* and the "who is a Jew" controversy to the constant huckstering to form a new government. Only true believers can still envision today's state of Israel as our ethnic "spiritual center."

For the great majority of Jews, the recent benign forces that have kept them Jewishly involved are no longer sufficient. They need ideological/philosophical leadership, reasons for involvement, and not just projects. Such leadership begins with articulating what we believe is so important about

particularistic Jewish identity that we ought to be active Jews despite America's temptations. Are we incidentally Jewish "unitarian" Americans or devoutly Jewish Jews who are also humanitarian Americans? (Borowitz, 1990).

The call for ideology, however, must be reconciled with the Torah concept of *Na-aseh v'nishma*, "We will do and we will hear." Rabbi Harold Schulweis (1990) reminds us that this concept means that belief is a consequence, not a cause of Jewish behavior. Belonging and behaving occur pedagogically before believing. It may be true that the large majority of Jews, including the affiliated, are only mildly interested in ideological clarity or denominational partisanship. Yet, even the concept of *Na-aseh v'nishma* suggests that faith is needed in something to generate and inspire desirable activity. In fact, some would interpret the phrase, doing before hearing, as the ultimate act of faith because our action does not require a justification or explanation. The problem in Jewish communal leadership is that the action, the involvement, the project, the doing, becomes the ideology itself, and we never come to the "Nishma," the believing, the ultimate faith that could eventually become the philosophical underpinning of our actions. What we are often left with are a variety of admirable leadership achievements and good Jewish deeds, which rarely receive the kind of reinforcement that would enable the behavior to evolve into a belief that would in turn inspire and sustain further Jewish activity—more personally motivated, and more profoundly effective and transmissive. In short, if we are to operate on the principle of *Na-aseh v'nishma*, which in many ways is, in fact, the *modus operandi* of lay leadership involvement, we must not forget the *nishma* (hearing, believing, faith) and simply assume that the *na-aseh* (doing) will take care of the ideology. A look at the apathy of the next generation, the intermarriage rate, assimilation, and the number of closet Jews surely should teach us that we cannot do without

the "nishma,"—particularly if we claim to encourage Jewish continuity.

COLLATERAL NEEDS—THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE JEW

Jewish educators have come to realize the importance of collateral activity in the education of children. The influence of the school is limited if there is no concurrent influence by parents to reinforce what is taught in the classroom. Thus is born the concept of Jewish family education, which has gained wide popularity in strategic planning for Jewish education.

In our work with lay leadership, the concept of collateral activity also has merit, particularly if we seek to maximize the personal impact of community service and give it sustaining power. A study of the degree and depth of involvement in Jewish communal life among adult children of Jewish lay leaders would likely reveal that community service is not the kind of activity that spiritually inspires children to follow in their parents' footsteps. A family with one or two parents involved in public Jewish life but that is devoid of spiritual meaning in the home cannot realistically expect that its children will be committed to Jewish communal service. The probability that community service will be bequeathed as a value within the family tradition is significantly greater when there are reinforcing activities in the home and within the family lifestyle that are more privately motivated and spiritually nourishing.

In previous generations, in Europe and elsewhere, when anti-Semitism was more blatant and Jews were at the mercy of foreign rulers uncommitted to the ethos of pluralism, Jewish citizens were less likely to express their Jewishness in public than in private. The home and family became the private sanctuary to express one's Jewishness in personal terms, in contrast to the public domain where one's Jewishness was carefully held in check. In fact, the Jewish passion manifested in the home was often a reaction to the frustration caused by public suppression. In America, it seems

the roles have been reversed. It is acceptable if not fashionable to express one's Jewishness publicly, particularly through community service and philanthropy. In contrast in the home, there is often very little carryover and certainly no need to exercise personal passion to balance public frustration. The collateral activity, reflective of private and spiritual motivation, is often conspicuously absent to reinforce and complement the Jewish public persona. It seems that when there is nothing to react against nor a need for spiritual renewal to remind ourselves who we really are, we may lack the awareness that Judaism must ultimately be proactive, not reactive, on a personal and private level, to inspire and sustain those under our influence.

Observance of Shabbat is an example of a private, collateral activity that should be considered in the Jewish cultivation of lay leadership on a "nishma" (faith—ideology) level; it is a means of personal reinforcement to complement public service. Respect for Shabbat, at some behavioral level, conveys a personal and private commitment to Jewish living that brings the home into a mode of life that has shaped and defined the Jewish people. When, based on personal and private conviction, a parent builds into the home an activity that connects one's family to 3,000 years of Jewish tradition, the family is imbued with a philosophy that becomes indigenous to its very being. Unlike community service, the sweet sanctity of Shabbat brings us into a sphere of spirituality, transcending time and the worship of self. A Jewish tradition lovingly and naturally integrated into the home can serve as one spark among many to protect and propel continuing Jewish identity and involvement. Here we have no dinners, no committees, and no plaques. Yet, we do have the opportunity to privately and genuinely penetrate the soul with the realistic expectation that the mind and body will follow.

In the professional community, we need to think about providing opportunities for collateral activity within the framework of

lay leadership involvement. It is important to recognize the power and primacy of private Jewish expression to inspire even deeper levels of involvement as we lay the foundation for Jewish leadership in the next generation.

THE LAY LEADER AS A SECONDARY CLIENT

As beneficent benefactors and policy shapers, lay leaders are often detached from the experience of receiving service. Uninvolved as recipients, they neither ask nor expect themselves to achieve certain goals that they establish for others. Further, professional staff reinforce this self-image by differentiating the role of the lay leader from the agency client. The lay leader is perceived by the professional, primarily if not exclusively, as a policymaker and potential giver and is cultivated accordingly. In some cases, particularly in regard to local agency involvement, the professional consciously elevates the role of lay leaders, ensuring that they will not be associated with the recipients of service so as not to jeopardize their philanthropic primacy.

It is generally assumed that, within the process of exercising communal leadership, lay leaders will be educationally coopted into assimilating the goals and expectations established for those they are representing in the expression of their leadership. This kind of seepage is an outgrowth of discussion involving others. It does not suggest or imply serious change on the part of lay leaders themselves.

Although the roles of lay leader and client are clearly disparate, it is not antithetical to effective professional practice to accord secondary client status to the lay leader, particularly if the goal is to reinforce and perpetuate leadership with a vision to the future. In this sense, according secondary client status to lay leaders so they can personalize the voluntary experience and thus assimilate Jewish standards is, in reality, indigenous to the leadership development process itself. It would only be

counterproductive if the professional engaged the individual equally as leader and client, with clashing purposes and conflicting expectations. When individuals are engaged primarily as leaders, in a way that sensitizes them to goals for others but also inspires them to assimilate these goals for their own personal development to ensure continuing leadership, then the professional role is at once valid and productive. With this strategy in mind, it would appear appropriate to accord secondary client status to the lay leader. The goal of Jewish education illustrates this point.

The commitment to Jewish education among lay leadership from all sectors within the Jewish community has never been greater. Agencies now tend to accentuate Jewish education in their request for allocations, and federations respond to this priority in the distribution process. Funds for Israel are also significantly earmarked for Jewish education. The role of the Jewish day school as the pre-eminent institution for Jewish education is now widely accepted, particularly as it has evolved as a community school. Few lay leaders today question the superiority of the day school for Jewish education and the need to support it generously. There is, however, a conspicuous disparity between the philosophical espousal of day school education among lay leadership and their personal or family involvement in such schools. Although they recognize intellectually the significance of day school education for Jewish identity, they are, by and large, sadly detached from these schools on a personal level. It is as if the service is designated for clients, but is not required of them or their families because they are not clients. A study of the day school participation of children and grandchildren of key lay leaders within the federation constellation on a national level might very well reveal that they are noticeably under-represented. Although they may publicly proclaim the value of day school education and champion its need for support, there is little evidence to indicate that it has much meaning to them on a personal level.

Here is an example of where the professional community can apply the concept of the secondary client role. In the process of relationship building and in presenting ourselves as professionals with values and convictions concerning future leadership and Jewish identity, we will engage in dialogue about Jewish education. It would not seem unreasonable to convey the notion that a day school education might be particularly desirable for families of lay leadership as we recognize their unique impact on the future of the Jewish community. Doing so does not require one to be judgmental or impositional, nor does it suggest that the lay leader be converted to client. Rather, it imputes respect to the lay leader because, in encouraging a deeper form of Jewish education for their families personally, it recognizes the significance of their roles and further suggests that it is indigentous to the leadership development process itself. It accords them power and status in terms of their roles in shaping our Jewish future. To inspire lay leadership to assimilate desirable goals on a personal level, which they already acknowledge as being valuable to others, is clearly in keeping with our professional responsibility to develop our leaders as people so as to personalize their experience and maximize their impact, not only for today but with an eye to our future as well. In a sense, our perception of them as secondary clients deepens our commitment to them as people and not just leaders; in the process, we help them become better leaders as well. In this way, the professional community contributes to Jewish continuity.

The provision of ongoing Jewish study groups for lay leadership is another illustration of how the professional community can help intensify Jewish consciousness so that it affects lifestyle and can have a more profound impact on the next generation. An occasional retreat may be temporarily soothing, but it is rarely enduring. A commitment must be made to provide opportunities for serious Jewish study in contrast to episodic experiences that tend to foster

dilettantism, rather than long-term commitment. It is possible and reasonable to develop an ethos of Jewish learning within the leadership structure of a community so that it becomes a kind of rite of passage, an expectation that conveys the relationship between the Jewish education of a leader and a vision of our Jewish future.

One concrete suggestion clearly illustrates the concept of secondary client status in working with lay leadership. It would seem both natural and logical for the Jewish community to reach out specifically to the young adult children of lay leaders and engage them in dialogue about Jewish community life and serious Jewish study. An earnest effort in this regard would recognize the significance of the parental leadership role, as well as ascribe a special kind of importance and opportunity to the children. This outreach service, within the leadership context, communicates to lay leaders that there is an interest in them beyond the need for them as leaders, that there is a relationship and responsibility between their leadership role and their family, and that there is a respect for their leadership in regard to its influence on Jewish survival.

FINAL COMMENT

The concept of projecting expectations for the privatization of Jewishness among lay leaders also suggests the importance of contract setting. The goal of fostering personal Jewish development for leadership should not be secretive or duplicitous. If we recognize the value of private Jewish expression, the significance of personal ideology, Jewish study for self, and Jewish education for children, it is altogether appropriate and honest to articulate these objectives up front as part of the formation of the leadership relationship. If the professional him- or herself is comfortable in articulating these aims, conveying a commitment to the personal Jewish development of a leader while stating their significance

for the future, it is more than likely that people of leadership caliber will respect such intention and feel enhanced that such value has been invested in them. In this regard, perhaps greater emphasis should be given to the recruitment of younger families in our leadership development strategy. Experience has taught us that young adults of leadership potential, whose attitudes, identity, and lifestyle are yet unfixed, are more impressionable and open to behavior modification through Jewish leadership expectations and standards.

There is evidence that lay leadership does not automatically propagate and if we are to reify our proclamations about ensuring Jewish survival, we must reach beyond the assignment of tasks and conventional leadership processes as acceptable professional goals. There needs to be a greater emphasis on ideology, rather than projects in the cultivation of lay leadership. Faith and ideology are ultimately more enduring and transmissive as we pave the paths to our future. Now, in America, we have the opportunity to be proactive Jews both publicly and privately and not merely reactive Jews shaping our identities as a response to anti-Semitism. In working with lay leadership, we need to understand the importance of collateral activity that is reflective of private and spiritual commitment and of personal passion and has the capability to inspire and sustain others within their orbit of influence. Finally, we need to look at our lay leaders as human beings who have overt and covert needs to express themselves Jewishly, on a personal level, in harmony with the goals and standards they set for others. Within the leadership development process, we need not be timid or ambivalent about encouraging participation in Jewish education that might lead to an integration in the development of self, leader, and family. In so doing, we honor our lay leadership as we recognize their role and potential in shaping our Jewish future.

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