

# THE CASE FOR JEWISH POLITICAL STUDIES IN THE FIELD OF JEWISH COMMUNAL SERVICE

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*Sound professional training and continuing education for Jewish communal service must incorporate elements of Jewish political studies. By showing the connection between past and present Jewish experience and by relating both to issues of communal organization, process, and policy, Jewish political studies integrates the professional skill development and Jewish studies components of Jewish communal service training programs. Several contexts for incorporating Jewish political studies into graduate and continuing education programs are presented.*

For much of its history, the field of Jewish communal service has been closely tied to the profession of social work. The subareas of that profession — case work and counseling, group work, community organization, social planning, and administration — have served as the organizing rubrics for Jewish communal service as well, and social work education has provided the backbone of professional training for Jewish communal work. From the first decades of this century, however, there have also been efforts to identify unique elements of practice, and hence of professional training, inherent in Jewish communal work. The first several attempts to establish specialized education and training institutions for Jewish communal service were all American — the school of Jewish communal work set up by the New York Kehilla in 1915, the Graduate School of Jewish Social Work that operated from 1925 to 1940, and the Training Bureau for Jewish Communal Service (1947-1951). They met with only limited support and success.

As the field of Jewish communal service, (JCS) achieved greater professional self-definition (with the evolution and growth, for example, of the Jewish Communal Service Association) and as Jewish organi-

zational life itself was consolidated, further American Jewish efforts toward the development of educational programs specifically designed to educate Jewish communal professionals bore fruit. The establishment of the Wurzweiler School of Social Work at Yeshiva University in the early 1950s followed by the Jewish communal programs in the 1960s, first at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles and then at Brandeis University, inaugurated a new era in professional education. These were shortly followed by the programs at Baltimore Hebrew College (now University) and Case Western Reserve in Cleveland. More recently, several other programs were established and/or are being developed. They include programs at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, University of Judaism in Los Angeles, Spertus College in Chicago, Ohio State in Columbus, University of Denver, University of Michigan, and the Cleveland College of Jewish Studies. Many of the programs under Jewish auspices are conducted in conjunction with secular universities. It is now reasonable to project that in the future, a significant portion of Jewish communal service staff will in fact be trained in programs specifically oriented toward JCS.

## DEFINING THE CONTENT OF TRAINING

The development of this institutional infrastructure for Jewish communal professional training has made more urgent the issue of how to define the appropriate *content* of such training, and indeed the qualifications to be established for the field as a whole (which will presumably affect the ongoing in-service training of those already in the field or coming into it from other educational backgrounds). Each of the graduate schools or programs in Jewish communal service has its own curriculum and approach. In fact, faculty members within the same program may have different perspectives on how best to educate Jewish communal workers.

Historically, discussions on the content of training have been focused on a few central issues. One is the appropriateness of the social work model itself as the master model for JCS and, by extension, whether social work training should be accorded the dominant place in educational programs for Jewish communal work. A second issue has been the proper balance between theoretical-academic and practical-professional elements in the education process. A third major focus of discussion has been the so-called Jewish component of Jewish communal work and JCS education; specifically, how extensively and intensively should professionals be exposed to the study of Jewish history and tradition, and what expectations (if any) should exist with regard to their levels of Jewish commitment, knowledge, and practice.

None of these issues is likely to be resolved definitively, and different programs will continue to chart somewhat different courses. Nevertheless, a *de facto* consensus has emerged in recent years that at least three primary components should be incorporated in some way into the educational process: (1) the acquisition of specific professional skills and knowledge including, but no longer limited to, those of social work practice (skills in policy

planning, management, and education are now increasingly in demand); (2) exposure to the Jewish tradition — the history, values, and way of life of the Jewish people; and (3) an examination of the dynamics of contemporary Jewish life — current trends and issues, the institutions and organizations of the community, and patterns of communal activity.

The rationale underlying this educational prescription seems to rest on a key position that is not always articulated explicitly, but seems to have won increasing acceptance in the field of Jewish communal service: that one of the primary clients of the Jewish communal professional is the Jewish community itself. This means that Jewish communal workers, no matter how technically competent, are not fulfilling their professional responsibility unless they act so as to preserve and strengthen the Jewish community and the values and norms that the Jewish community embodies. This is not an unproblematic formulation, but in a community dominated by an ideology of "Jewish survivalism," it is likely to be an increasingly powerful one.

For the professional — especially one who aspires to be a "leader" as well as a "servant" of the community — fulfilling this mandate demands the ability to reflect critically on the values and norms of Jewish communal life, to assess their applicability in a specific programmatic and decision-making context, and to relate them knowledgeably to the institutional system in which he or she participates. For many within and outside the field, it is this requisite competence as knowledgeable *Jewish* leaders, more than their diverse professional skills, which makes it appropriate to speak of Jewish communal workers as practitioners in a single field. When one turns, therefore, to the question of where to focus professional educational endeavors, enhancing this capability to respond with critical acumen to the needs and institutional system of the community as a whole suggests itself as a prime area, not only for

its intrinsic importance but also for its unifying impact for all those who are part of the Jewish civil service.

### JEWISH POLITICAL STUDIES

Within this context, the significance of Jewish political studies in the professional training effort becomes clear. Even assuming that "Jewish knowledgeability" is made a focus of Jewish communal education, one must still answer the question: What kind of Jewish knowledge? Charles Levy (1976) of the Wurzweiler School of Social Work has suggested five key areas as follows:

That which all practitioners in Jewish communal service may require for effective performance, aside from those requisites associated with particular fields of practice and occupations with which they are identified and for which they may have been prepared, would include (1) knowledge affecting the history and development of Jews as a group; (2) the origins, nature, and condition of the Jewish communities as they have been constituted; (3) Jewish communal structure and organization, including decision-making, planning, supporting, coordinating, and other process, dynamics, and resources; (4) the needs of Jews individually and collectively, and the methods employed by Jewish communal organizations and agencies to deal with them, and with the needs of others whom they happen to serve; and (5) the relationship between Jews and Jewish communal agencies, on one hand, and other groups, organizations, and the social welfare structure of the community, nation, or society as a whole, on the other.

Without intending to do so, Levy offers in this statement a brief on behalf of Jewish political studies as a (if not *the*) critical academic component in the education of the Jewish communal professional. Comparing Levy's list with the subfields of Jewish

political studies identified by Daniel J. Elazar in 1967 at the beginning of the development of the field supports this conclusion. The study of Jewish political organization, institutions, and behavior; of Jewish public law and practice; and of intercommunity and external relations — all areas being developed within the framework of Jewish political studies — can provide that body of shared knowledge that will give communal workers credentials as Jewish leaders of broad perspectives.

Even more significantly, perhaps, Jewish political studies can provide an analytic framework that facilitates comparison and generalization from the mass of available information on historical and contemporary Jewish communal organization and activity. The conceptual tools of Jewish political studies — drawn both from the vocabulary of political science and from within the Jewish political tradition itself (e.g., the all-important concept of *brit* as a political category) — make it possible to use the data of history and sociology more effectively in polity determination and evaluation and in assessing both the empirical viability and normative authenticity of present communal structure and processes. A polity cannot be effectively administered by leaders who lack an understanding either of its political dynamics or the political tradition that shapes it. Thus, although not every communal professional may require an equivalent exposure to Jewish political studies (or to every subfield within it), it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine that sound professional training for Jewish communal service today can proceed without a concerted effort to incorporate at least some elements of Jewish political study into the curriculum.

Despite this potential significance and the growing body of literature, both historical and contemporary in focus, now available to students, Jewish political studies is still only on the verge of making a major mark in education for JCS. Material gathered from several of the major graduate

JCS programs indicates that study of the Jewish political tradition (at least explicitly) generally plays a subsidiary role at best in them. All of the programs do require course work on American Jewish communal organization, and all offer some opportunity for historical and textual studies that may bear on Jewish political life and for examination of current issues in communal affairs. The importance of Elazar's *Community and Polity* (1980a) for framing the understanding of how the American Jewish community is organized and of the functions that professionals must assume is illustrated by its inclusion in the curricula of the courses currently offered in the Brandeis, Baltimore, Gratz, HUC-JIR, JTS, University of Judaism, and Wurzweiler programs.

These curricula also reveal, however, that study of the contemporary community is usually not related either to historical materials or to a body of theory and concepts taken from political science or the Jewish political tradition. Given the limitations on the classroom time of the programs (not to mention fieldwork), it is perhaps understandable that there is little extended study of the Jewish political tradition in these JCS programs. Yet, if Levy is correct in his estimation of what the Jewish communal professional needs to know, some intensive study of that tradition, both its empirical and normative dimensions, would seem to be critical.

The entire area of continuing education for communal workers — which, defined broadly, includes not only specific training programs but also sessions as conferences and professional association meetings and publications aimed at a professional audience (notably articles in the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*) — is one of expanding activity today. As with the graduate education programs, however, a perusal of journal articles and conference programs over the course of recent years reveals only a few explicit efforts to deal with historical or conceptual dimensions of

the Jewish political tradition. In these forums too, there is obviously much to be done and little time and space to do it in, so that the pressures to focus on areas of practical training and on issues with immediate implications for professional functioning can be considerable. There has been a persistent interest in ensuring that continuing education programs remain linked to professional practice and to the daily activities of the communal worker. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that in recent years there has been increasing concern for augmenting the Jewish dimensions of the professional's knowledge and skills. Most notable are the continuing education programs of the Council of Jewish Federations.

Therefore, to expand the role of Jewish political studies in both initial graduate training and continuing education for Jewish communal service, two challenges must be met: (1) to develop a rationale for the incorporation of study of the historical, as well as contemporary, dimensions of the Jewish political tradition that demonstrates the utility of such study for the communal professional and (2) to develop appropriate formats and methods for teaching the Jewish political tradition that embody this rationale.

#### Rationale for the Incorporation of Jewish Political Studies

Both challenges can be met successfully by recalling the basic propositions of the field of Jewish political studies itself. Two of the major assertions underlying the field are that there is a continuous tradition of Jewish political activity extending from the biblical period to the present day and that this tradition can be understood in terms of several recurring fundamental themes and organizing rubrics. Contemporary organizational structures and issues need not, therefore, be regarded *sui generis*; rather, they probably reflect both persistent principles of Jewish political organization and persistent problems that affect such a

political system. The contemporary Jewish community's growing awareness of itself as a polity thus constitutes a rediscovery of its roots in the historical Jewish experience. Yet, it also opens up to the community new resources for dealing with its own problems and potential. The variety of concerns dominating Jewish institutional life today — the qualifications and authority of leaders, relations between and among organizations, methods of securing and priorities in allocating financial and human resources, ways of balancing voluntaristic commitment and the need for communal self-discipline, the development of a Jewish ideological stance that can sustain, motivate, and legitimate communal endeavors — are all issues that have been addressed empirically and normatively within the framework of the Jewish political tradition.

This fact provides the more direct approach to extending the scope of Jewish political study within professional education. Although (nearly) everyone in the field speaks of the desirability of providing communal workers with "historical perspective" and fostering their appreciation of "Jewish values," there is continuing frustration at the practical instructional level with the abstractness of such a prescription. What too often results is a de facto compartmentalization: professional skills in one box, contemporary Jewish studies in a second, and some exposure to Jewish history, texts, or thought in a third. Integration of these three areas may then remain at best an earnest wish, at worst an impossible (and therefore abandoned) task for the individual worker or trainee. By showing the connection between past and present Jewish experience and by relating both to concrete issues of communal organization, process, and policy, it is precisely the content and perspective of Jewish political studies that break down the wall of separation among these three components of professional education.

#### **Format for Teaching Jewish Political Studies**

The teaching of the Jewish political tradition to the Jewish civil service should therefore embrace a thematic and issue-oriented approach. Current communal issues, familiar as such to the professional worker, can be represented in political terms, using the conceptual rubrics of both contemporary political science and the Jewish political tradition. Historical materials can then be adduced that illuminate the issue and set it in the context of Jewish political life as a whole. The payoff for the student — whether graduate trainee or practicing professional — will not necessarily come in the form of a "solution" to the problems of contemporary communal life, but in the acquisition of new, broadened perspectives that can inform his or her professional work. Redefinition of a problem, understanding of an issue in terms of its historical precedents and evaluations, the ability to locate oneself and one's institution on a map of the total political system of contemporary Jewry — all of these, although providing no simple recipe for action, add to the likelihood that when action is taken, it will be rooted in a more comprehensive and more perceptive appreciation of the options available and of their potential impact.

This approach to incorporating Jewish political studies into both graduate and continuing education for Jewish communal work has been employed in several different contexts in recent years: a course designed by Jonathan Woocher for the Hornstein Program at Brandeis University, the curriculum developed by Rela Geffen Monson at Gratz College, a series of talks by Daniel Elazar presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Jewish Community Organization Personnel (AJCOP), and a leadership development program designed by Woocher, with the assistance of Elazar and Monson, through the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs for

the Council of Jewish Federations. Although these constitute imperfect models, they do suggest positive lines of direction for ongoing work in this area.

The course, "Community in Jewish Life," prepared by Dr. Woocher several years ago was designed to provide students in the Hornstein Program with an overview of the development of Jewish communal organization linked to specific concerns of professional practice. The approach of the course was topical, i.e., it explored several themes (the normative basis of community in Jewish tradition, patterns of authority and leadership, organizational structures, communal functions and priorities, intra- and intercommunal relations) and used historical materials as *resources for* rather than the *subject of* analysis. It also sought to place the historical descriptive materials in context by abstracting key patterns and recurring issues of political organization and activity. The final stage in the analytic process involved re-examining current issues — federation-synagogue relations, leadership qualifications, conflicts over allocation priorities between overseas and local needs and between social service and other communal functions (education, community relations), relationships between national and local agencies — in light of these recurring patterns and problems, using precedents and analogies to try to suggest how the contemporary issues could be approached within the framework for the Jewish political tradition.

A framework for analyzing political life and the Jewish political tradition was presented by Daniel Elazar in his lectures to AJCOP members on the issues of participation and accountability in contemporary American Jewish communal life, later published by AJCOP and the Council of Jewish Federations as *Participation and Accountability in the American Jewish Community* (1980b). In these talks, Professor Elazar analyzed several recent trends and problems — the representativeness of leaders, the role of federations as

"framing institutions," and the meaning of accountability — in terms of the fundamental relationships between the Jewish *edah* (as a *res publica*), the "publics" that comprise it, and its *nesi'im* (the leaders "elevated" from it). This analysis demonstrated that an understanding of the Jewish community as a polity with a constitutional tradition and characteristic approaches to dealing with perennial political problems can help the communal worker avoid some of the deadends that frequently frustrate efforts to resolve these basic issues. Elazar showed, for example, that stimulating the participation of diverse publics in the communal system will be vital if the polity is to maintain the historically validated balance between "aristocratic" and "republican" dimensions of governance. Similarly, drawing on the work of Stuart Cohen, he demonstrated that the oft-posed question — who should lead the Jewish community: rabbis, lay leaders, or communal professionals? — in fact reflects an inadequate understanding of the traditional Jewish concept of leadership, which envisions a mix of shared and divided authority among exemplars of three different *ketarim* (crowns): the crown of Torah, the crown of *malkhut* (governance), and the crown of *kenunah* (priesthood).

It would thus indeed be possible to combine basic education about the Jewish political tradition (and its inherent conceptual system) with an incisive analysis of contemporary trends in the Jewish body politic in ways that render the former relevant to the work of the professional and place the latter within a context of Jewish political evolution. It is time to create syntheses of contemporary and historical analyses to aid communal policy making and leadership role definition. These syntheses could be embodied in a systematic educational program for JCS, thereby providing a historical perspective and a conceptual framework for examining contemporary Jewish communal life.

The need has never been greater.

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