

DOING THE JOB IN DIFFICULT TIMES

An Appreciation of the Jewish Family Service

GAIL ABRAMSON, ACSW

Jewish Family Service (JFS) agencies have been a supportive presence in the Jewish social service network since well before the American Jewish family became an endangered species. Providing services for multiple individual and family concerns, the JFS has long undertaken to meet those needs that could only be responded to in its unique setting of clinical competence and confidentiality. Nevertheless, as the approach of a new century has brought with it unparalleled social problems, the JFS has increasingly struggled in an unfriendly economic environment to maintain the positive profile it has long enjoyed. That it has been an unqualified success in this struggle frequently goes unnoticed and the very special programs it offers are often overlooked. It is time to acknowledge the distinct role this unsung agency plays in the preservation of Jewish families in this country.

Recognizing the JFS is particularly important now because there is a tendency by some Jewish communities to solve their fiscal woes by eliminating, severely altering, or referring out the delivery of those social services that were once taken for granted as intrinsic to indigenous Jewish life. All too often the casualty of these financial retrenchments is the Jewish Family Service, which is co-opted into a larger Jewish organization ostensibly for the safekeeping of its much-needed therapeutic services. The JFS may be increasingly becoming the institutional sacrificial lamb of the late twentieth-century American Jewish community. It is hard to imagine a worse time for this sort of social service amputation.

Needless to say, those who participate in this communal revisionism do not see it in such draconian terms. They perceive themselves as guardians of the community's financial stability while simultaneously ensuring that those who need mental health

services are not denied. They view it as the disbanding of the JFS while continuing — under another umbrella — the delivery of Jewish family services. Semantics aside, it is not that easy to effectuate.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE JEWISH FAMILY

Of all the communal institutions supported by the Jewish community, the JFS in name and mission is the only one devoted solely to the fostering and enhancement of the Jewish family. With the exception of burial, there is virtually nothing Jewish that cannot be accomplished in the home. Prayers can be said, *minyanim* can be convened, candles are lit, holidays and major life milestones are celebrated, and values are transmitted. Judaism, in its darkest hours, was not perpetuated on the racquetball courts or in the swimming pools of the Diaspora. It was fostered in the sanctity of the home. Throughout our history, family has superseded community institutions. And, with the exception of the synagogue, for most of that time the family was the *only* community institution.

Despite the development of Jewish community agencies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, no one — even today — disputes the supremacy of the Jewish family in the fabric of our survival. Yet as a community we appear to be in the process of abandoning our most precious human unit. As Steinitz and Weidman (1993) noted in this journal

Our community and Jewish survival are challenged because our families are overstressed, undersupported and often in jeopardy of general systemic collapse. Throughout our history, Jewish identity has been formed and primarily nurtured in families. If the family

structure is damaged or destroyed in its ability to function constructively, then the core around which all other Jewish institutions depend is also diminished. Scholars, rabbis, and communal leaders agree on one essential truth — that it is primarily out of our day-to-day experience within the family that Jewish values, compassion, and religious observances are learned. *If families are not supported, the community cannot survive.* (Italics mine.)

Jack Wertheimer (1994) in a perceptive essay on Jewish family values in *Commentary* notes, "In all the talk about 'Jewish continuity' little attention has been paid to the Jewish family. When the euphemisms are stripped away, a community preoccupied with its prospects for long-term survival would seem to need to focus precisely on problems within the family that may prevent the transmission of a clear and strong identity."

The Jewish community needs to re-evaluate its posture toward the JFS and re-invest in the well-being of the agency. What message does the elimination of an agency devoted to family support say about the community's commitment to the Jewish continuity agenda?

THE VULNERABILITY, AND STRENGTH, OF THE JFS

Throughout its history, the JFS has responded to needs that no other Jewish agency was equipped to face. That has not substantially changed. Although some lines between agencies are less clearly delineated than they once were, the JFS is still consulted for its clinical expertise and strong grounding in working with the more challenging mental health issues of the day.

In assessing this reality, the question of community comfort with the problems of people in need must be examined. Our culture values success, and need is often perceived as weakness or failure. Coupled with this dynamic is Jewish denial of many escalating social problems and a predisposi-

tion to regard most presenting problems as superficial and easily dispatched.

Generally, calls to JFS run the gamut from the most benign request for information to the most significant expression of pain. On any given intake day requests for help may concern alcoholism, AIDS, domestic violence, drug abuse, and a whole host of emotional and mental health issues. By marginalizing the provision of services to these clients through referral to outside sources, the Jewish community is clearly saying that "we cannot or will not help you ourselves."

By so marginalizing the provision of social services, the Jewish community is buying into the prevailing mores of the predominant American culture. It is no secret that the United States lags far behind other developed countries in providing for family needs, that our public policies on family leave, flex-time for working parents, quality day care for children and the elderly, and many other issues affecting family life in America are less than optimal. Judaism, in comparison, has always revered the family and has developed many rules and regulations designed to bolster the parental role in stabilizing the family.

Acceptance of the prevailing cultural norms carries a heavy price, a price we cannot afford to pay. By eliminating the JFS agency or diluting its service delivery system the community has abrogated its commitment to respond to the realities of contemporary Jewish life. It also reflects our communal unwillingness to acknowledge personal need. The juxtaposition of strength and vulnerability is reflected in the presence of the JFS. The existence of the agency validates the presence of need; the establishment and support of the agency reflect the ability and communal inclination to deal with it.

COPING INNOVATIVELY WITH CHANGE

A consistently remarkable aspect of the Jewish Family Service is the chameleon-like

tenacity with which it keeps its doors open and revolving in the most difficult of economic times. The JFS is singularly innovative in reinventing itself because it has no choice. The needs are escalating, not diminishing.

The JFS must provide services to all who need on a sliding fee scale basis, and it cannot raise fees beyond what the market will bear. Because it is not a membership agency, it cannot charge up front and because it deals with a frequently vulnerable clientele on an as-needed basis, its income projections are often unpredictable. The most successful agencies stay in business on a consistent basis by testing the waters of community need and providing responsive services.

Changing Demographics

As a result of shifts in Jewish demographics, the JFS has had to increasingly answer to a clientele less able to pay for services and more likely to need more intensive intervention.

Sometimes the JFS is criticized for serving other than a largely Jewish caseload. If the Jewish community is aging, diminishing in size, or is less affluent than it was formerly, the agency must still meet its needs. It sometimes does so by extending its quality services to the non-Jewish community, which often seeks it out because of its fine reputation. This is particularly true in cities and communities where the Jewish population is a small minority. Serving the non-Jewish community preserves Jewish services for a segment of the Jewish population that already has a disproportionate struggle in maintaining its Jewish individual and family viability in the presence of overwhelming non-Jewish numbers.

It is notable, too, that a preponderance of non-Jewish clients has been a reality for years in large city hospitals, nursing homes, and other community facilities that still bear Jewish names and reap the benefits of our fund-raising campaigns. Singling out the JFS for the demographic profile of its

clientele is disingenuous because it flies in the face of fiscal realities and faults the agency for its mission to serve the Jewish community no matter what the scope of its needs.

The Jewish Nature of Services is Critical

Jewish Family Service agencies provide counseling and supportive services as representatives of the Jewish community. Implicit in this provision of service is the imprimatur of the organized Jewish community and its sanctioning of those services. In Jewish counseling agencies staffed with Jewish therapists who are connected to their own ethnic base, cultural sensitivity — more than religion — constitutes the essence of the JFS. Nonreligious and observant Jews alike come to our door for help because they know they will be understood, that their personal issues will be evaluated in a cultural-specific context. That the JFS crosses denominational divisions within Judaism in a positive and productive manner is rarely acknowledged or appreciated. In an era of denominational divisiveness, the JFS fosters service delivery on an equal opportunity basis. No one's religious credentials are checked at the door.

The needs of the Jewish elderly are also more sensitively treated in a Jewish setting. The Jewish community is aging at a faster rate than the general populace. The agenda of the adult children often diverges from that of the parents. Even if the setting of the session or the religion of the counselor is not important to the adult child, it is often very important to the parent. And those who say this will change soon are mistaken. As we age, our personal identities take on new and sometimes more emphatic meaning. Time and again, families and clients who seek nursing home placement counseling dismiss the importance of a Jewish facility only to return weeks or even months later lamenting the lack of *yiddishkeit* in the setting they chose.

In an era of heightened cultural pride, the Jewish community has to consider seri-

ously whether it wants to deliver the provision of supportive, life-enhancing, and culturally affirming services into the hands of the non-Jewish community. It is naive to think that others will care for our needs better than we do. By providing a culturally specific and sensitive clinical service delivery system the JFS is fulfilling the mandate of Jewish continuity in an unheralded but significant way.

Furthermore, the individual or family that seeks out the JFS receives help that will allow it to gain access to the activities and services of other Jewish institutions and maximize their use. A dysfunctional family, for example, that is coping with divorce or unemployment and is undergoing Jewishly sensitive family therapy will be encouraged to send their child to a Jewish summer camp or Jewish learning experience, enabling that child to experience those services more successfully. How can a child in stress otherwise absorb the benefits of these Jewish programs, and why would any but a Jewish agency encourage their specific use?

JFS Functions Need to be Provided at a JFS

Agencies have and need identities to function appropriately. How can an institution extend a hand when who and what it is may be poorly defined? Who would feel comfortable and well taken care of in such an environment? If a signature problem of the Jewish community is ambivalence, we can hardly have this replicated in our agencies and support systems.

If the JFS becomes at best an adjunct to another agency, an afterthought to this new host agency's mission and mandate, or at worst merely a referral source for an outside service, then how can it seriously hope to continue to encourage utilization and patronage? The client whose life is disarray should not have to enter the same doorway as nursery school children on their way to class or early morning joggers headed for the running track. At the very least, identity must be accompanied by space and dig-

nity, not to mention respect for the nature of the need. The JFS function is too important to be relegated to a homeless status.

PERSPECTIVE ON THE FUTURE

Ironically, the tendency of some Jewish communities to navigate their way through an unstable economy by diminishing their Jewish Family Service comes at a time when other communities are seeking either to establish a JFS or grant autonomy to an already existing JFS that has been part of a functional federation. The Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies (AJFCA) routinely receives calls from representatives of communities without a JFS who are identifying unmet individual and family needs. There is a level of discomfort in these communities in not having a Jewish institution that can be responsive to family stresses. Many of these communities, which vary in size and demographic profile, have either a federation or JCC or a full complement of nonsectarian agencies. It is not enough.

Reinventing the JFS to be responsive to new and emergent needs is only part of the prescription that will ensure quality Jewish social services into the twenty-first century. It is also incumbent upon the JFS to foster the recognition its excellence. No one else will do it.

Self-Promotion

The Jewish Family Service needs to become its own best friend. JFS agencies provide extraordinary services for their clients, but are frequently inept at marketing their own contributions. Recognizing the need to acknowledge the importance of agency promotion, AJFCA has inaugurated the *KOVOD Award* at its Annual Conference. This honor recognizes agency efforts and creativity in getting their message of service across to the community.

Political Awareness

Jewish Family Service agencies need to be-

come more sensitive to social, political, and economic forces. As Bargal and Schmid (1992) wrote, "Organizations that fail to change can find themselves in a critical situation. *Environments tend to change much more rapidly than organizations* (Italics mine)."

Program Development with the Bottom Line in Mind

Specialized case management services, clinical services for target populations, and high-tech information and referral services are only some of the JFS programs that are revenue-generating and greatly beneficial to the community. Many agencies have these programs in place; others are increasingly aware of how they can better exploit their already existing in-house expertise for greater financial health.

Agencies that market themselves, pay at-

tention to changes in legislation and funding streams, program creatively, do outreach, and keep their collective fingers on the pulse of the community tend not to get co-opted out of existence. Agencies that grow in spite of the relative demographic stability of their primary constituency may ultimately serve multiple clienteles, but will survive to continue to fulfill their original mission.

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