

ARE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTERS A FIFTH DENOMINATION?

GERALD B. BUBIS

Founding Director, Irwin Daniels School of Jewish Communal Service, Hebrew Union College, Los Angeles and Vice-President of the Jerusalem Center of Public Affairs, Israel

The one consistent ideological strand in the 141-year history of Jewish Community Centers in this country has been the ongoing love affair with America. Judaism on demand, rather than demanding Judaism, is the norm in JCC settings. JCC members do not see themselves as members of a denomination. Rather they are seekers after comfort—psychological and physical, associational and familiar—who wish to learn skills, keep well, be entertained, and have their children or parents in a caring and nourishing environment with a vaguely defined Jewish ambiance.

The question posed in the title is an intriguing one. It is also a long-lasting one. In the 1920s Louis Kraft, executive of the Jewish Welfare Board, began a series of colloquies in print that has been continued ever since.

A CONTINUING METAMORPHOSIS

The metamorphosis of YMHAs, Jewish settlement houses, and JCCs has been underway since the first YMHA was founded in 1854. Over the past 140 years, these institutions have undergone a series of phases, each lasting about 20 to 40 years. These phases can be called the genteel assimilatory period (1854-1885), the de-Jewing of the immigrants (1885-1925), the bridging of the German and East European Jews (1925-1945), suburbanization and "cross-roads of Jews" phase (1945-1967), recreational emphasis (1968-1985), and the "Jewification" period, 1985 to the present.

The Genteel Assimilatory Period (1845-1885)

German Jews satisfied their need to be Americans by refracting Christian institutions into acceptable form in American

terms while maintaining some Jewish frame of reference. The use of the word "Hebrew" instead of "Jewish" was no accident and reflected the simultaneous development of the then-nascent American Jewish Reform movement—Union of American Hebrew Congregations and Hebrew Union College. Hence, the Young Men's and Women's Hebrew Association, mimicking the Young Men's and Women's Christian Association.

The activities of these Hebrew (sometimes literary) associations reflected the move of German Jews to middle-class respectability and gentility. Jewish practices and concerns were secondary to literary, social, and athletic programs that allowed Jews to socialize together while often engaging in activities that, by their nature, did not emphasize differences between Jews and non-Jews or differences between and among Jews. This essentially middle-class value-laden enterprise reflected the values of the sponsors of the YMHAs, the established German Jewish community.

With the beginning of the pogroms and the subsequent ever-burgeoning influx of Jews from Eastern Europe, the same sponsors of the YM/WHAs continued their support. They responded, however ambivalently at first, to the need to serve the Jewish immigrants with institutions geared to the immigrants' needs (often as defined by the "enlightened" German Jews).

For 18 years, Gerald Bubis served as a Jewish Community Center executive.

The de-Jewing of the Immigrants (1885-1925)

This response of "uptown Jews" abetted the explosion of the Jewish settlement house movement in the midst of the immigrant ghettos in cities throughout the country.

Some of the most innovative services to families in American history had their start in the settlement house movement. Nursery schools, kindergartens, dental clinics, job services, and resident and day camping were but some of the innovations that grew out of the movement, with the Jewish settlements often leading the way. During this period, however, the Jewish needs of the newcomers were often de-emphasized. And although there was a proliferation of Talmud Torahs, often community sponsored, throughout the country, they were infrequently supported by German Jews who instead tended to encourage the settlement houses to emphasize the Americanizing process for immigrants. Americanization was achieved not only by offering much-needed English classes but also by frequently forbidding the use of Yiddish in settlement house activities. Fierce ideological battles between Jews played themselves out in this period, sometimes within the Jewish settlement houses but often elsewhere. The nascent Zionist movement fought its battles with the Bundists, the Culturalists, and so on. There is little evidence to indicate a consistent devotion on the part of the settlement movement to encourage and celebrate this growing diversity within Jewish life. Instead, the advent of World War I cemented the Americanizing process, and the settlements and the YMHAs came together to create the National Jewish Welfare Board (JWB)—a name imported from England—to serve American Jewish servicemen and to develop an association of YMHAs and Jewish settlements houses.

The Bridging of the Jews (1925-1945)

This next period, which Louis Kraft helped

shape as the executive of JWB, saw a great building spurt of JCCs throughout the country. The writing of Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism, about an organic Jewish community came to influence a significant minority of Center thinkers.

The Depression sent many hopes crashing, not only on an individual but also on a community level. Merger discussions between JCCs and YMHAs were often accelerated by economic necessity. This period was also a time of political ferment. The doors to America had clanged shut early in the 1920s. By the 1930s ideological battles of a new kind were increasingly volatile. The burgeoning popularity of Communism among many Jews was accompanied by an increasingly strident development of Zionist thought and ideologies, albeit among a much smaller number of Jews. The Centers often became the venue for these battles, for most Jews were not affiliated with synagogues. The Centers and settlement houses were often sustained professionally by staff who were being paid by federal grants through the Work Progress Administration (WPA). Artists and actors, who were often very ideological, found the Centers and settlement houses to be hospitable places for their advocacy—and often this was an ideology with a "cosmopolitan" tone. Jewish particularism was seen as a stepping stone to the universalism of a Socialist vision of tomorrow's possibilities.

As in the First World War, World War II brought an even greater emphasis on the Americanization process in Centers. Air-raid warden training, "victory gardens," selective service registration programs, outreach programs to Jewish servicemen, and paper drives were dominant. The results of Hitler's horrible nightmares were little appreciated. It was not until the height of the war that the realities of Hitler's Germany began to be reflected in the Center's public forums.

The war's ending saw the move to the suburbs accelerated by the return of the GIs and the Jews' inordinate use of the GI Bill

as the passport out of the ghettos to the gilded suburbs. The mass movement of Jews out of the city accelerated the merger process among settlements, Centers, and YMHAs.

Suburbanization and Crossroads for the Jews (1945-1967)

The rush to the suburbs was accompanied by a burst of building of JCCs and synagogues in the suburbs. Some synagogues began as JCCs, and some synagogues transformed themselves into JCCs. The growing affluence of Jews enabled an outpouring of dollars to build these institutions in the suburbs even as funds at a level previously undreamed of found their way to support the new State of Israel.

This period celebrated the Center as a meeting ground for all Jews and its role as a hospitable home for diversity without emphasizing or elevating any one type of Jew. This produced a comfort with Jewish identification as a goal compatible with the best of American values. During this period as well, more people with masters degrees in social work were employed in Centers than in any other non-governmental non-profit setting in the country. The philosophy of social work schools, which emphasized individual choice while acknowledging the potency of group membership, provided a comfortable fit with the Center's emphasis on a kind of generic Jewish programming.

In retrospect, this period seems to have been the most comfortable period for comfortable Jews who were comforted by the Center and its programmatic offerings. Cultural activities, lecture series, crafts, arts, and performances often emphasized Jewish issues and concerns, but they were seldom cast in terms that questioned or searched for greater meaning or more serious examination of contemporary Jewish realities. The Six-Day war can be seen as a kind of watershed for it ended the Center's dominance of the local Jewish agenda in many communities throughout the country.

The Recreational Period (1968-1985)

The American Jewish agenda changed from 1967 on. Israel became more central to the hearts, minds, and pocketbooks of American Jewish leadership. Numerous Center executives, in many instances following the shift in power, became federation executives. The "Israelcentric" givers gained dominance in the federation system, which up to 1967 had tended to be dominated by locally focused Jewish leaders. The comfort of suburban Jewish living became increasingly jarred by major changes in the attitudes and behaviors of Jewish young adults: opposition to the Vietnam war, Israel's draw upon a significant minority of Jews for whom visiting and studying in Israel became increasingly important, urban unrest, the disintegration of a significant number of Jewish families, the aging of American Jewry, postponed marriages, and zero population growth.

All these changes came to affect Centers in degrees at first not comprehended.

The Jewification Period (1985 to the Present)

The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey confirmed what many Jews felt but were unable to quantify—that there had indeed been an exponential increase in intermarriage, including the children of those who had been most active in Center and Jewish community activities. Energy, money and interest were then focused on enhancing Jewish identity.

THE CENTERS—A FIFTH DENOMINATION?

After this brief review of the metamorphosis of JCCs, we are finally ready to answer the question—are JCCs a fifth denomination?

According to Webster's *Unabridged Dictionary*, a denomination is "founded, sponsored or controlled by a religious group...usually composed of many local churches [sic]...or influenced by the beliefs,

attitudes, or interests of a religious sect." Although JCCs have been shaped in general terms by some of the values, calendar, and attitudes or interests of Judaism, they cannot meet the test of being considered a Jewish denomination.

Centers have always both benefited from and suffered from their central difference from synagogues. At the core, people join Centers because they want to, not because they need to. They join because the *activities*, not the ideology, attract them. Thus, Orthodox Jews for whom a good physical education program is important will use Centers so long as they demonstrate their sensitivity to traditional Jewish requirements—single-sex swimming times, Shabbat and holiday observance, and so on.

The Center's leadership may enunciate a philosophy of pluralism, but that philosophy seems to play itself out differently depending upon the size of the city. In many smaller and intermediate cities, Jews of all persuasions and affiliational backgrounds are comfortable with the Center as a place for all Jews. Their use of Centers is driven by the need of the family or individuals to find a place for quality activities that happen to be sponsored by the Jewish community. A significant number of non-Jews also find JCCs to be such a place.

There are also significant minorities within the Jewish community who are comfortable attending JCCs because no ideological test is involved in membership. Intermarried couples, new immigrants, single-parent families, and gays are but some examples of these subgroups. The associational aspects of JCCs thus provide a comfort level precisely because there is no "test" in terms of Jewish behavior or belief. This comfort level naturally tends to be at its highest for those who do not respond well to externally (or God) generated expectations for behaviors and/or belief.

The obverse is also true. Generally speaking, those for whom Jewish expression entails "required" behaviors and beliefs tend to fault JCCs for their lack of ideologi-

cal expectations.

As I indicated earlier, in the smaller and intermediate-sized communities, Jews of all ideological expression will "purchase" an activity at the Center if that activity coincides with their recreational or re-creational needs. If they choose the nursery school for their children they will tend to expect sensitivity in terms of Jewish calendar observance, as well as Jewish activities that do nothing to contravene their Jewish behavioral or belief system. These "members" will tend to be synagogue affiliates also.

In larger cities there tend to be more people who choose the Center as their preferred setting for Jewish affiliation. The elderly, intermarried couples, and immigrants from Israel and the former Soviet Union where Jewish religious expression is an anathema or unknown provide a significant and disproportionate source for membership. Those who desire some undefined series of activities under Jewish auspices and/or Jewish activities of a pleasant and therefore acceptable level will often be more comfortable in a Center setting than in a synagogue. Jewish identity for their children is often desired without reference to a clearly defined or coherent philosophy geared to any specific outcomes. (This is not to deny that many synagogue members also possess no coherent philosophy.)

Centers have engaged in programmatic, adaptive behavior since their beginnings over 140 years ago. The one ideological strand that has been consistent is the ongoing love affair with America. As the expectations of America toward its newcomers have changed, so the Centers have reflected these changes. As the ebb and flow of acculturation and assimilatory trends have changed, clashed, competed, and receded, so have the programmatic emphases of Centers.

A review of the writings of those who have grappled with the role of Centers in America over the past 100 years reveals the consistency of this adaptive pattern. Some have argued that Centers are a kind of non-

religious Jewish denomination. Yet, most have taken the opposite tack, seeing the Center as a place for all Jews of all denominations and/or outlooks to come together and celebrate that which binds them together in their sameness. At the same time, almost all of the writers see Centers as a place where non-Jews could also belong while hoping this would not weaken its Jewish purposes.

Many writers have emphasized a strongly focused and delineated programmatic emphasis drawing upon Jewish sources. A number have been influenced by the thinking and writing of Mordecai Kaplan who emphasized the notion of an organic Jewish community. A few see Centers as a universalizing setting where the Jewish component should be de-emphasized.

Yet, even as these writers have discussed Centers' purposes, the members have spoken with their voices and their feet. For the most part they do not see themselves as members of a movement, adherents of an ideology, or affiliates of a denomination. They are seekers after comfort—physical and psychological, associational and familiar—who sometimes wish to learn skills, keep well, be entertained, and have their kids or parents in a caring and nourishing environment within a vaguely defined Jewish ambiance.

I would argue that this is the genius of Centers. There is no more democratic setting in the country. Its boards today most often reflect the members. Gone are the old days of the "uptown" trustees deciding upon the needs and programmatic priorities for the "downtown greeners."

If the Centers had not constantly reinvented themselves they would not be here today. This strength has some deficits. Judaism on demand, rather than demanding Judaism, will more likely remain the norm in Center settings. The expectations that

are central to most of Judaism's teachings can be explored in Center settings as possibilities, not expectations. Gemorah and Talmud need not be alien in a Center setting, but exposure to the possibilities of serious study must be subjected to a buy-in process grounded in voluntary choice—the choice of the JCC to offer the possibilities, the program offerings, and the choice of member to attend or not, as he or she decides.

It is true that a synagogue member also had to decide to join. Yet, families who want a Bar or Bat Mitzvah will subject themselves to a set of expectations—study, skill mastery, and the like—that ironically are only possible in some aspects of the Center's physical education program, e.g., the competitive teams that some Centers sponsor.

Therefore, the challenge to Centers today remains the same as yesteryear: to remain relevant to its constituents, to provide options and opportunities, to raise sights and expectations, to stimulate personal and Jewish growth, to encourage Jewish diversity, to celebrate Jewish possibilism, to reflect and refract Jewish realities and potentialities, to encourage social responsibilities, and to transmit Jewish and general skills. To do all these things in a Jewish atmosphere while encouraging intellectuality as appropriate, body and mind-stretching experience where possible, creative and innovative application of Jewish verities, grounded in respect for the past, awe of the present and hope for the Jewish future does not require a fifth denomination. It demands a fidelity to the larger purpose of Jewish continuity and continuing Jewish re-creating, re-forming, re-constructing, re-shaping while conserving and revering the traditions we call Judaism. All who work in and on behalf of Centers have the charge to transmit all of these possibilities to the end that there will be a Jewish future. *Ken Yehi Ratzon.*