

THE CHALLENGE FOR JEWISH COMMUNAL PROFESSIONALS IN ENHANCING JEWISH IDENTITY, COMMITMENT, AND UNITY

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Although Jewish communal service is not a profession in the classic sense, we can insist on having professionals in the field. The essential task of professionals today is to guide and goad lay leaders to deal with the larger issues confronting Jewish life. For that is the greatest contribution of lay leadership—the formulation of goals and objectives for Jewish life and its institutions.

The rabbis teach us that the world is re-created everyday. They also teach us to use texts and experiences from the past in our search for truths.

In preparation for the 1981 International Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Ralph Goldman, now emeritus executive vice president of the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), wrote a fine monograph entitled *The Role of the Professional in Developing and Shaping Communal Policies and Strategies*. Its examination of the role of the professional is still relevant, and it provides a valuable context for assessing our continuing slow rate of progress in responding to today's realities.

Goldman begins by reminding us that communal workers are descendants of prior Jewish professionals—those who labored “to serve community and preserve it” (Goldman, 1981, p. 1). These professionals had changing roles—kings, priests, prophets, elders, rabbis, and teachers—and changing titles: “Rashim, Chachamin, Parnassim, Tovim, Ne’emanim, and Gabbaim, to name a few” (Goldman, 1981, p. 2).

Just as the roles, tasks, and titles of professionals changed, so did the Jewish communities that they served, often in response to the external environment—“the social and economic state of affairs of their host countries, as well as the political climate” (Goldman, 1981, p. 2). Yet, with all the differences among communities, Jewish communal professionals “share a common direction of development, as we strive to harness the forces of technical knowledge and professionalization in meeting Jewish needs” (Goldman, 1981, p. 3).

For Goldman, the sine qua non components of the Jewish communal professional are “Jewish commitment and knowledge, management skills, and leadership ability” (Goldman, 1981, p. 11). He writes:

The professional must be a diplomat, a persuader, a negotiator of coalitions, an influencer of institutions and people who have the power to allocate resources The professional must seek compromise instead of conflict and bring people together.

When the commitment of Jewish survival is linked with management skill and leadership ability—with an implicit obligation to effective planning, community education, and assuring economic viability—we see that the professional, by definition, plays an integral part in the development of Jewish communal policy and strategy (Goldman, 1981, pp. 16–17).

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Goldman views the role distinction—lay leaders make policy that professionals implement—as unrealistic and inappropriate. Rather, every staff person plays some role in shaping policy, “whether raising the questions, issues or concerns; supervising, administering, or implementing policies ultimately adopted by lay people” (Goldman, 1981, p. 18).

In the conclusion to his monograph, Goldman charged *all* professionals with personal responsibility in these five areas:

1. To develop and deepen Jewish consciousness based on knowledge as well as emotional commitment
2. To strive for excellence in professional competence—management, interpretation, planning
3. To demonstrate leadership qualities through initiative and serve as educator and model for emulation and inspiration
4. To promote participation of the constituency and balance between the roles of laymen and professional
5. To make effective use of human and financial resources available to the community (Goldman, 1981, pp. 28–36).

Some positive changes have taken place since 1981. The JDC program of education for Jewish communal workers is taking shape. Models drawn from the work of Albert Sandarey in South America should be implemented soon. The Jewish Agency Commission on Jewish Education; the Council of Jewish Federations (CJF) Personnel Committee review process, and North American-based continuing education programs; the Jewish Welfare Board's emphasis on maximizing Jewish education effectiveness and the subsequent burgeoning of its Israel-based programs; the continued proliferation of programs of Jewish communal service in North America; the Wexner leadership programs for lay and professionals; the work of the Jerusalem Center for Jewish Public Affairs; CLAL's programs for leadership in North America; the Schwartz program at Hebrew Univer-

sity; the panoply of offerings through the WZO worldwide and in Israel; the programs of the Shalom Hartman Institute—all demonstrate the increasing seriousness with which the issues of Jewish identity, community, and unity are being responded to today.

One hesitates to quantify these efforts in dollar terms or to assess the numbers served. Undoubtedly, the cost is in the tens of millions of dollars. An educated guess would be that a minimum of three to four thousand communal professionals have been involved in one way or another in these programs. Most of these programs are geared to Diaspora Jewry. Lest that be taken as a sanction for smugness by Israelis, I am not at all sure that Israeli-based institutions have been particularly responsive to the concerns that Goldman identified in 1981.

The challenges for Jewish communal professionals remain. Many agencies engage in measuring their progress even as they often lay claim to being oriented to effectuating change. The role that professionals play in helping assess agency progress and focusing on and implementing the services that bring about change varies widely throughout the world. Some lay people view staff as technicians who fill out forms, take minutes, mail out notices. In these instances staff are not looked to as leaders within the systems in which they work.

Why is action so painfully slow, even as events unfold so painfully, unexpectedly, and frequently?

To answer this question, we must first explore who we are as professionals and who we are not. Goldman's assessment of Jewish communal service still holds true today. We are not a profession in the classic sense of that word; namely, having a shared body of knowledge, skills, methods, and values. That will always plague us. Yet, one could hope that some minimum criteria beyond working for the Jewish people would define us. Bernard Reisman has argued that we are a profession, but most writers on the subject take issue with

him. I stand somewhere in between, feeling that Jewish communal professionals do share a common core of values, but depending upon the setting in which we work there is no consensus yet as to what *all* communal workers should know and what skills and methods all should share.

Although we cannot view Jewish communal service as a *profession*, we can insist on having *professionals* in the field. Research done in the scientific community is of relevance here. Professionals in the field of science share six attributes, regardless of the profession to which they belong (Kerr et al., 1977):

1. *Expertise*, which is the result of prolonged special training
2. *Autonomy*, the right to decide on means and ends most appropriate in their work
3. *Commitment*, being devoted to work and profession
4. *Identification with others*, casting one's lot with the professions and one's fellow professions
5. *Ethics*, aspiring to be unselfish in the conduct of one's activities
6. *Collegial maintenance of standards*, taking responsibility for setting and enforcing standards of one's profession or setting

By any assessment measure, we are a long way from laying claim to being a common field of service totally peopled by professionals. I suggest that relatively little progress in becoming more professional has been made in the 8 years since Goldman's monograph because we are not yet a collectivity.

Each continent, country, and often each community has an idiosyncratic understanding of the roles of professionals and lay leaders. Some communities view staff members not as professionals but as technicians. They are paid to be secretarial civil servants serving at the beck and call of lay leaders, implementing their decisions and guiding the bureaucratic infrastructure that is in place. This point of view has little

understanding of etymology, ignoring the fact that the word "profess" means to stand for and advocate a point of view.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is another position (often secretly harbored by professionals) that *they* are not only masters but the owners of the various systems serving Jewish life. This view holds that professionals write the agenda of responses that grow out of contemporary realities. Lay people are to be manipulated and used to implement the visions and goals enunciated by professionals. They are thus seen as tools, necessary but still tools for the professionals to use.

A third position suggests that lay and staff are partners, with equal stakes in the identification of concerns and the marshaling of necessary material and human resources to provide services appropriate to the particular mission under consideration.

There is a fourth position, which I believe is closer to a desired model. This view suggests that professionals and lay leaders are equal in importance to the processes of providing services. Both professionals and lay leaders must be civil, honest, and respectful in their dealings one with the other. They must recognize that which they share by way of responsibility, knowledge, values, and skills and that which separates them in their roles; that is, their specific tasks and responsibilities in carrying out the mission of the organization or community they serve. They are partners of a sort but not equal partners. Staff *can* be fired. They must be held accountable for their actions, and the lay people must be able to shape the policies for this process.

The lay board in turn is the legal entity that is responsible for the communal enterprise. It is the board, not the president or chair, that holds this responsibility. The chief volunteer officer cannot alone hire, fire, or manage the enterprise.

There have recently occurred major crises in the governance systems of our worldwide enterprise because of conflicts between lay and professional leadership. These conflicts must be addressed in order to get on with

Jewish business. To do so, it is essential to clarify these following issues, which affect both lay leaders and professionals:

- The source of most values
- The paradoxes born of contending expectations between lay and professional leaders
- The realities of limitations
- The role of staff in contributing to some of the problem
- Unshared visions
- Deprofessionalization and its consequences

SOURCES OF VALUES

Most professionals and lay people today are primarily products of Western thought and values. They tend to be Jewish illiterates even as they tend to possess undergraduate and graduate degrees from secular universities.

To the degree that being Jewish informs their thought or action, for many being Jewish is either a source of dis-ease or dis-ease to them. The horrific aftermath of the Holocaust and the consequent view of the world as peopled with naught but anti-Semites, real or imagined, overt or covert, shape the hearts, minds, and responses of such people. The history, teaching, and values of Judaism are shaped by what Graetz called the lachrymose view of Jewish history. This litany from the past downplays the importance of the *Mussar*, the ethics of how to behave, and emphasizes the tear-ridden chapters of our history.

Outside of the Jewish sphere, the values determining what they are and how they behave are drawn from the worlds of commerce and management. This leads to some paradoxes that confound and confuse.

PARADOXES

Both lay leaders and professionals accept the premise that the primary measure of any program is its effectiveness and effi-

ciency. This has resulted in the use of technocratic tools and measurements as the end-all of Jewish life.

The paradox arises from the recognition of some lay and professional leaders of consequences if these expectations become the sine qua non of Jewish life. Can Adin Stensaltz's life work be measured on a "cost-effective" basis? Will his work sell enough copies to pay for his time, thought, and genius? When institutions for higher Jewish learning need to replace a scholar who specializes in Ugaritics and Hittite, what measures of effectiveness and efficiency can be applied?

The paradox is born of an overemphasis on the values of the marketplace and an undervaluing of those ideas, values, and practices that are truly beyond measure.

REALITIES THAT SHAPE US

The death of cultural literacy for most of us, lay and professional, becomes a cage that we are unable to leave, for we are prisoners of our past. There is little practice emphasis on esthetics, values, beauty, or ethics. We too often measure success by purely fiscal tools. Our response is to use marketing concepts and the world of commerce as our model.

Jews everywhere are telling us that being a Jew in an open society is no longer desirable or needed. Affiliation rates are down. The numbers of students enrolled in any kind of Jewish education are down. Inter-marriage rates are up. The litany has been recited and lamented by demographers and philosophers alike. We have done a poor job in demonstrating to the young the joy, challenge, and potentiality inherent in living lives informed by Jewish teaching. Most of us therefore find it difficult to cope with the pursuit of many of our young of postmaterial satisfactions; in short, for spirituality and purpose in their lives.

We are brilliant at trying to repair our broken vessels, dealing with the physical

problems of Jews. We cure or attempt to cure, but we do not spend much time or effort in prevention.

The response—to market our Jewish wares, to equate what Jews and Judaism stand for with business goals—in turn alienates the sensitive and turns away the creative and the thoughtful among us.

This leads to my fourth point.

STAFF AS PARTNERS IN CHANGING NORMS

Historically there have always been a variety of leaders with various styles representing various groupings in Jewish life. The presence of the *g'vir*, the successful businessman, has been a constant in our history. *Ba'al hamea*, *ba'al badea*—the master of the money is the master of the idea—is an old aphorism. Yet, so is the saying, *Ayn kemach b'li Torah; ayn Torah b'li kemach*. There is no sustenance without learning and no learning without sustenance.

We staff have been party to increasing the power of the businessman. Where in past the scholar was also important—and indeed often the scholars were also successful in commerce—we have successfully minimized the role of the scholars, artists, and scientists among us in the governance elite. I am *not* suggesting that precisely because a person is a financial success that he or she has little by way of transferable knowledge and wisdom. I am suggesting that it is not automatically the case. And there are others who may even have as much or more to contribute toward the future of Jewish life.

It is ironic that the Jews who do most to shape the hearts and minds of the young in the general society are disproportionately overrepresented in the arts and academe and tragically underrepresented in shaping Jewish life and institutions.

We have been partners in creating a mono-elite in governance. Too many of the highest placed among us imitate the

world of commerce, and too few turn to the worlds of our parents and to the most creative among us for answers to our Jewish future.

All of this leads to many unshared expectations.

THE UNSHARED EXPECTATIONS

We must understand more clearly that the “business” of the Jewish community is not *survival* per se. Physical survival of Jews is commendable. However, Jews uninformed by values or expectations will only continue their march into the secular world with no differentiation of self and values in the process.

On the whole, Jews celebrate modernity by making the most of its opportunities. The Jewish genius has been found in taking advantage of the environment to keep the community and its abiding values relevant to the lives of Jews and Jewish life. Creative continuity is our business. Making being Jewish, “doing” Jewish relevant, exciting, stimulating, and informing to our lifestyles and relationships is the primary issue for the community and its lay and professional leaders.

Lay leaders are often increasingly oriented to management concerns and less engaged in the governance issues. Staff often respond with concerns about the issues of power—who will manage—and fail in what should be one of their essential tasks. That task is to guide and goad lay leaders to deal with the larger issues confronting Jewish life.

The problem here goes back to role perception. What lay leaders *want* of staff is often different than what they *need* of staff. The synergism born of respect between lay and staff can be enhanced if the guidelines and respective roles become clearer.

The knowledge and values needed to help shape a positive Jewish future must be learned by lay and professionals alike.

They might well learn them together. Essential to this learning process is the key task of professionals—to enable lay leaders to focus their energies and talents on the broadest issues. Governance requires constant fidelity to the mission of an organization and the goals and objectives that are set forth as a result of that mission. Micromanagement—attention to the smallest operational details—often engages and fixates the lay person, which leads to organizational paralysis because the visions that must engage the agencies and organizations are lost.

It is for the lay leadership ultimately to ratify priorities born of these visions. Emphasis and priorities must be grounded in the sense of mission and purpose that attracted lay leadership in the first place. For that is the greatest contribution of lay leadership—the formulation of goals and objectives for Jewish life and its institutions.

Staff does have a role in this formulation of goals and objectives. They are not only implementers of policy. They must share their dreams and visions for Jewish life and its future. Jewish professionals are not *shamashim*, *gabbaim*, and *schnorrers*. They have dedicated their lives to Jewish life and they play honorable roles that should be respected and at times venerated by lay people. Psychic pay can be as important as concrete compensation.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF DEPROFESSIONALIZATION

The paradox born of elevating efficiency and technocracy over Jewish values has several unanticipated consequences. One such outcome is the deprofessionalization of the field.

There has never been such a high percentage as today of Jews who are truly among the super rich of the world. Never have Jews as a group been so affluent. Yet budgets of Jewish agencies everywhere are being cut, efficiencies have been instituted,

and executives have responded by hiring people without professional education.

The pool from which to choose tomorrow's staff elite is smaller than ever before. As a consequence too many have risen too far too fast into places of power. A seller's market exists at this upper level because of the paucity of the talent pool.

At lower staff levels feminization is a reality. Although this is desirable as a statement of egalitarianism, two realities must be recognized: the Jewish executive suite is still closed to women and fewer women are physically mobile. Thus, the lower middle management and staff slots are filled in a buyer's market. Salaries are depressed, and the ultimate outcome is the process of deprofessionalization.

Senior staff have been a party to this process in the voluntary sector. The salary gap between senior executive staff and beginning professional staff is so great as to border on the immoral.

Hard choices must be made. Too often, the hardest choice of all—maintaining quality service while maintaining quality staff—has not been the choice made. Instead, freezing or lowering beginning salaries has resulted in the erosion of the quality of service. Well-qualified staff move to other settings where liberal doses of psychic pay and adequate fiscal remuneration go hand in hand. Ironically in the nonprofit private sector it is often the nonsectarian or government setting where these compensations are found most frequently.

These six issues converge and have the potential for being joined together. Without energy and attention to these issues, the challenge of enhancing Jewish identity, commitment, and unity cannot be met.

WITHOUT A COMMON CORE, THERE CANNOT BE COMMON CAUSE

We tend to be overly wedded to the government, ministry, department, or organi-

zation that pays us. Parochialism abounds. The greater the issues, the graver the consequences of unsolved problems, and the greater the fragmentation that seems to overtake many of us.

Unlike many other settings or fields of service in which professionals work, we are not the masters. We are in an inextricably bonded relationship with lay leaders. Therefore, a monologue with ourselves will result in little. Rather, our leadership skills, our negotiating and persuasive abilities, and our commitments must be channeled into challenging our lay counterparts about the action agenda that is before us.

Jewish educational standards must be raised for lay and professional alike so that the frame of reference basic to the whole enterprise that we call Jewish communal service is based upon commonly held values.

Lay *and* professional leaders who are Jewish illiterates should have the grace to step aside at this juncture in history. They cannot be the shapers of Jewish destiny when they lack a sense of Jewish past and teachings. At the least, they should enroll in enrichment programs (jointly) so as to become Jewish literates. There are many efforts underway to provide this education. Participation in these programs must be a requirement, not an option. A curriculum is needed that engages professional and lay people alike. There is no such thing as a Jewish professional identity or a professional Jewish identity. The Jewish communal professional's role is clear: **Begin with enhancing one's own identity in concert with lay leaders.** From this can come the clarity so necessary to building the professionalism that so often eludes us.

Commitment to the people and state of Israel must transcend commitment to factions within the people and government

of organizations, *all* of which are ultimately transitory. Then, the quest for unity will not result in what is too frequently the case today, a demand of uniformity. We must be brave and wise enough to appreciate the need for respectful dissent and debate, for only through the process does true unity result.

Rabbi Steinsaltz said it best.

The Jewish people should see itself as a single large family, as a special social entity with personal ties kept close and firm. This national entity is considered primary, not as a sum of its many parts but as that which results when it rises in level from one soul to another and reaches such a greater perfection that all the souls of Israel constitute one general soul which is the divine manifestation of the world.

Therefore, the various souls relate to one another as parts of one body; and from this point of view, the higher a person rises, the "trials and difficulties involved are increasingly concerned with one's fellow man. For every human being is a part of the single soul that is the spirit of the entire universe.

The challenge in short is to consider our own work holy and strive to be the *Klei Kodesh*, the holy vessels, working for the betterment of all humankind.

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