

An Alternative Perspective on Training Jewish Communal Workers*

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"All professional training programs strive to achieve a blend of theoretical and practical requisites. In the Jewish field there is the additional requirement of weaving in a Jewish component which adds to the complexity of the task."

IT is less than a decade since the emergence of the graduate school programs specifically geared to training people for careers in Jewish communal service.¹ The presence of these specialized Jewish training programs has begun to have an impact on the professional preparation for Jewish communal careers and current experience suggests that this impact is likely to increase in the future. This being the case, it is appropriate that the field address itself to reviewing periodically the objectives and methods of these Jewish training programs. Professor Cutter's article

* See article by William Cutter, immediately preceding.

¹ The current programs with specialized concentrations in Jewish communal service are:

1. The Baltimore Institute of Jewish Communal Service, co-sponsored by the Baltimore Hebrew College and the University of Maryland, School of Social Work
2. Brandeis University-The Benjamin S. Hornstein Program in Jewish Communal Service
3. Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, California School of Jewish Communal Service
4. The Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Yeshiva University

Prior to the development of these graduate programs there were three previous specialized Jewish communal training programs each of which lasted a brief period of time. A school for Jewish communal work was organized in conjunction with the New York Kehillah and lasted from 1916-1919. The Graduate School for Jewish Social Work functioned from 1925-1939. A more modest program, the Training Bureau for Jewish Communal Service, offered mainly supplemental courses and operated from 1948-1952.

is an important contribution in this regard. My comments are designed to extend this discussion by offering a somewhat different perspective on the curricular focus of the schools.

Defining Jewish Communal Service

At the outset it would be well to identify and explore an issue which Cutter only alludes to implicitly. Generally, the field of Jewish communal service is understood to refer to those professional personnel who perform a range of social work functions within the network of Jewish social welfare agencies. By itself this is a disparate group, including case workers, group workers, social planners and community organizers. In addition to these disciplines, Cutter, in his approach to Jewish professional work, includes rabbis and Jewish educators. This raises a basic question: Is it useful to identify a single field of Jewish communal service, encompassing people from different professional backgrounds?

Loewenberg, addressing this question, offered what he considered a "pragmatic" definition of the field of Jewish communal service: "all those fields which by common consent devote their efforts to some activity considered to further the group identification and group survival goals of American Jews, and are financed through Jewish communal funds."² From the vantage point

² Frank M. Loewenberg, *Survey of Manpower*

of assessing the requirements for professional preparation of personnel working in the Jewish community, the issue is whether the body of knowledge and skills applicable to the shared Jewish purposes is sufficient to warrant a common educational frame of reference. On the one hand, it could be argued that the recent heightened interest in enhancing the Jewish aspects of Jewish communal institutions has raised this dimension of the requisites for professional competence to a central position. Accordingly, recruiting Jewishly-committed individuals and providing them with a good Jewish education would be the prime professional training objective.

Such a position underlies Cutter's approach to the training of Jewish communal workers. His major premise is that Jewish knowledge should be the overarching emphasis in the graduate curricula of the schools of Jewish communal service. Such a position of centrality is to be achieved at the expense of the practical or technical aspects of training. That Cutter comes to such a position is, in part, a reflection of his unified orientation to Jewish communal service. If one begins with a unified view of the field it follows that the Jewish dimension, the basis of the unity, is elevated to prime importance. At the same time the practical requisites of the curriculum, which vary across the separate disciplines, are viewed as less vital.

While I think much is to be gained from a generic approach to training Jewish communal workers, and clearly the current trend is moving in this direction,³ I do not think it is functional to

Needs in Jewish Communal Service (New York: Bureau for Careers in Jewish Service, Inc., March, 1971), p. 4.

³ Evidence of the trend to a single profession is seen in the very development of the schools of Jewish communal service and the growing momentum within the National Conference of

ignore the differing needs of the several specializations, since these emerge from tasks and problems within the Jewish community, the resolution of which require diverse knowledge and skills.

For example, I believe that the extent and scope of Jewish education for rabbis and Jewish educators should be different from that expected for those Jewish communal workers preparing for social work functions. It is well to state that we expect all professionals who work in the Jewish community to be thoroughly trained Judaically, but such a position doesn't help us with the realistic choices which inevitably must be made in any educational curriculum. In a similar vein I would contend that the technical competences required by the Jewish social workers as compared to the rabbis and educators differ in nature as well as degree. Relative to their professional function the balance between means and ends of these two groups of Jewish communal workers should be differentially defined. By lumping together the several disciplines within the Jewish professional field a distorted emphasis emerges. While I am in accord with Cutter's call for enhancing the Jewish knowledge of all Jewish professionals, I believe his attempt to speak with a single perspective for the field leads him to underemphasize the importance of the practical component in the training programs for Jewish communal service.

An Alternate Tension

Weighing the priorities of professional education for Jewish communal service from the perspective of a faculty person in one of the graduate schools of Jewish communal service, I have ex-

Jewish Communal Service for re-defining its purpose and function so as to reflect a common frame of reference for its associate professional groups. (See report of the Membership Policy Committee by Dr. Carl Urbont in the Conference's publication, *Concurrents*, Winter 1975-76.)

perienced a somewhat different dilemma from the one described by Cutter. He speaks of the pressure, coming primarily from the professional practitioners in the field, for giving greater emphasis to technical skills, with the implication that the field is less concerned about the Judaic requirement of the curriculum. I think this was an issue five or more years ago, but today the Jewish dimension has assumed a much higher priority both in the work of the agencies and their expectations for the Jewish qualifications of their personnel. Granted this trend needs to be strengthened, at least at this point the signals I receive from the field tend to endorse the Jewish emphasis in our curriculum.

But I am aware of a related tension generated by a different constituency — faculty and students — which warrants discussion and analysis. I refer to the tension arising in the university between an academic and professional orientation. With students the issue is initially focused around uncertainties about their decision to enter a professional career. Five years ago it was not part of the ethos of college graduates to be career-oriented. That generation was still very much under the influence of the counter-culture, and as such a professional career implied selling out to the "establishment" and an undue concern for materialism. As we have seen over the past several years, much of the idealism and radicalism of the late '60's has given way to indifference and apathy on broad social questions and a turn to privatism in individual orientation. Now college students are flocking to concentrations in law, medicine and other career-oriented specializations. Similarly, turned-on Jewish students today are more comfortable in translating their commitment into decisions to prepare for a career in Jewish professional work.

There are obvious differences among the professional career alternatives in relation to the pressures and tensions of graduate school. That Jewish communal service and Jewish education have a lower status than law or medicine, for example, has a bearing on the student's feelings as he is involved in preparing for a Jewish professional career. The aspiring Jewish professional does not have the same future prospect of occupational prestige or material rewards as does the aspiring doctor or lawyer. The promise of future recognition and reward can be a buffer to the inevitable rigors and uncertainties which need to be worked through in the course of graduate professional training.

The problem is accentuated by the differential status of the academic and professional tracks within the university. Academic programs are generally more highly regarded than professional programs. The student experiences this differential status on three levels. First, as a member of the academic community he soon recognizes that he and his professional department do not rate as well as students and departments of an academic nature: A Judaic Studies major has a higher status than a student preparing for a career in Jewish communal service. He feels this in his interactions with other students, and above all from the faculty.

On a second level, the student recognizes that the intellectual challenge of the professional curriculum generally is not of the same order as with academic courses. This applies both to field practice as well as professional courses. In part this is explained by the nature of the task of imparting practical skills required by a "craft." Much of the knowledge and skills of practice is a matter of personal artistry. This is difficult to conceptualize and takes on differing meaning and utility depending on the range of styles and needs of individual learn-

ers. Moreover, it is unlikely that many student-professionals can achieve a level of mastery of professional skills which will offset the frustrations they experience in their efforts to apply their learnings in their internships. The resulting impatience is transferred to a disillusionment with the effectiveness of the professional curriculum content.

Finally, the frustration of the student in the professional program is compounded by the additional burden of having to deal with personal issues as part of his training. As an applied practitioner his self and style are relevant areas for learning. Therefore, in addition to the normal academic demands of cognitive learning — reading, writing papers, and studying for exams — the student-professional must deal with trying to accommodate his personality to the requirements of professional practice.

So the student in the professional program must cope with questions concerning personal adequacy as well as respond to more typical learning requirements. Yet, relative to fellow students in academic programs, he can count on less support — present and future — in responding to his situation: he has to make peace with a lesser status in the academy and he anticipates a future professional career with less reward and recognition.

A Call For More Judaica

Another dimension to the professional-academic dichotomy in training programs for Jewish professional work comes from Judaica professor colleagues in the academy who call for increased courses in Jewish studies at the expense of the professional component. Here Cutter's argument in favor of deepening the Jewish competence of the Jewish professional is carried to its logical extension, namely, that a knowledge of Jewish sources and values is

necessary not only for personal commitment but also in terms of its applicability for professional practice. As a Jew educated in classical sources the professional would have a broadened vision and perspective to respond to the utilitarian needs of the job. It then follows that the professional inputs in the curriculum can be safely reduced and replaced with academic courses in Judaica without jeopardizing professional competence.

Clearly the matter is one of balance. The programs of the schools in Jewish communal service offer an alternative to traditional graduate programs in that they are predicated upon the principle that the curriculum must include a significant Jewish educational component. The danger is that the pendulum moves to an extreme — producing people whose Jewish credentials are exemplary but who are inept professionally. This is apt to take expression in two ways. First, the lack of professional commitment makes it difficult to work effectively with colleagues in the agency settings. Such staff people often reflect an oppressive air of superiority, seeking to uplift colleagues who are viewed as *am haartzim* (unlearned people). A second area of difficulty arises in work with clients or members, where the lack of professional skills adversely affects the quality of practice. Effective help calls for more than good intentions.

We neither make a contribution to the Jewish community nor do we establish the credibility of the schools of Jewish communal service if we produce graduates who do not function well in their jobs.

A Professional Rationale

What in fact is the rationale for professional courses and field work? Most obviously, there is material to learn about the people with whom we work, the institutions and communities which

host the Jewish social welfare services, and the processes by which a professional works with people in the Jewish community so as to contribute to the achievement of their purposes and those of the Jewish community agencies. Professional training must also prepare the student to become a self-directing practitioner. He comes to understand the requirements and responsibilities of the professional tasks that are to confront him and has some sense of how to respond to them. He is socialized for a professional role. His role includes a body of knowledge to instruct his job functioning, ethics to guide in making choices, and ties to colleagues and mentors to offer support and sanctions for adhering to qualitative standards. Lastly, the professional component of the graduate training helps the student define his own personal style. Each practitioner has to achieve a synthesis of his personality and the several strands which feed his professional role — the theoretical, the Jewish and the professional. The school experience facilitates the achievement of this synthesis, both in terms of its atmosphere of openness and experimentation and its utilization of the specific curricular resources of field work, supervision and academic advising. The educational objective is to impart information which can be useful in responding to specific work tasks, and also to enable the student to achieve sufficient competence in his professional capacity to generate confidence in the people with whom he works.

The School as a Model of Jewish Organizational Functioning

I am convinced that one of the most important ways professional skills can be communicated to graduate students (and a way insufficiently recognized and tapped) is how the educational enterprise is organized. The graduate school

experience is a microcosm of a range of agency services within the Jewish community. How the program directors structure the academic program and how the faculty and advisors respond to the students are prototypes for professional services. The students may well learn more about professional practice from the way the faculty function in their organizational roles than in any of the more deliberate formalized teaching efforts. I agree with Prof. Cutter that much professional skill can be learned on the job. However, to thereby justify not responding to the students' call for specific professional skills inadvertently communicates a poor professional lesson in being perceptive and responsive to the needs of learners or clients.

Do the professional knowledge and skill which are taught during graduate training make a difference in professional performance? I have no hard data on the question, but as I look at graduates in the field, there is clear evidence of a positive association. Conversely, I can identify a number of graduates who were high on Jewish commitment and background but never achieved any professional competence, who have been floundering in the field.

All professional training programs strive to achieve a blend of theoretical and practical requisites. In the Jewish field there is the additional requirement of weaving in a Jewish component which adds to the complexity of the task. Since the Jewish communal training schools are relatively new few precedents are available upon which they can depend. Furthermore, no national organizations, such as the Council on Social Work Education, exists to offer the schools guidelines and support in pursuing solutions to their curricular problems. Clearly in recent years the field of Jewish communal service has increased its expectations for Jewish commitment

and education for its professional practitioners. This modification in priorities inevitably will require a redefinition of the place of the traditional practical focus of professional training programs.

My response to Prof. Cutter's paper is an effort to find an appropriate synthesis between the Jewish and practical emphases in the graduate preparation of Jewish communal workers.