

Jewish Identity and the Function of the Family and Children's Agency*

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... I agree with Miller's questioning of why we as a field have failed to respond significantly to the crisis of Jewish identity and survival, and I support the search for the complex reasons for this phenomenon. But I disagree with his conclusion, that is, to create a "new concept of function" and a new profession with a sense of "ethnic mission."

CHARLES MILLER has done us all a service by holding some critical issues in the Jewish communal field under the lens of intensive scrutiny ("Jewish Identity and Agency Function", Fall, 1983). In the brief time permitted for response, I will attempt to focus on three points:

1. The notion of "Jewish identity"
2. The concept of *expanded* function
3. The Jewish family agency and the "ideological approach."

Jewish Identity

Miller correctly asserts that "one rarely encounters any clear discussion of what is meant by Jewish identity or of what we would like to achieve in dealing with it." I suggest that we need to linger a bit with that elusive notion of "Jewish identity" before we concur on aims.

Who is a Jew? Cynthia Ozick states that "When a Jew becomes a secular person he is no longer a Jew." (from *Art and Ardor*, C. Ozick, Alfred A. Knoph, 1983.) Do we agree? Disagree? Do we

mean men and women defined by religious beliefs and values? Or do we mean the secular Jew, self-defined by a connectedness to Jewish ethnicity and culture? Do we mean the Zionist who works and fights for Israel, but who has not stepped into a synagogue—or prayed—for twenty years? Is he a "lapsed" Jew? Or a strongly committed Jew?

Is someone a Jew because he/she is so defined by others? Or is a Jew a Jew by virtue of an internalized sense of self, laced with a partially unconscious core identity? And is this identity positive? Negative? Ambivalent? Even tortured?

Who really defines the Jewish in "Jewish identity?" As professionals in Jewish family service, we need not be burdened by theological or ideological mandates. For us, there is no *one* answer. It is the client's definition that counts, a definition which encompasses the wide diversity of expression of one's Jewishness.

Clients who come to our agencies with family and personal difficulties seek our help with a sense—sometimes only dimly perceived—that they are Jews seeking help from a Jewish agency which is part of the organized Jewish community. That powerful dynamic shapes practice, and should never be underestimated or ignored. But Miller does not seem to recognize this service variable. He even states that "the people who have the problem (i.e., eroded Jewish identity) are not affiliated, rarely

come into the framework of the Jewish communal system, and do not ask for help." This is simply inaccurate. As a matter of fact, the unaffiliated Jew is *more* likely to come to the Jewish family and children's agency for service than to a synagogue, or to a Jewish day school. Although this unaffiliated Jew generally does not explicitly state he "has a problem with Jewish identity," the ethnically-sensitive caseworker will include, in both assessment and treatment, the fact of Jewish identity as it relates to the specific problems the client brings.

The concept of Expanded Function

I contend—contrary to Miller's view—that our current family service professionals are well-positioned to provide a successful course of counseling or therapy as ethnically-sensitive social workers in a Jewishly-identified agency, with an end result of a Jewishly-strengthened and supported family or individual. Rather than a new concept of function, I suggest that what is needed is recognition, retraining and reorientation—with a *new emphasis on the direct connection between solid, clear and positive ethnic/religious self-identity, and high self-esteem, little self-degradation, and positive self-concept.* (see Judith W. Klein, Ph.D.; "Theory and Application of Ethnotherapy to Jews," unpublished paper; and J. Giordano and G. P. Giordano, "The Ethno-Cultural Factor in Mental Health," New York: American Jewish Committee, p. 10.) And we can capture the "hunger for ethnic roots and relatedness" (p. 11, Miller.) that Miller refers to, in order to maximize the fact that the American culture now tends to support ethnic diversity and ethnic difference rather than subscribing to "melting pot" notions which tend to blur and deny difference.

Of course, this is no easy task, but it appears regressive to suggest a separate concept of function, as Miller does, as a response to the complexity of the task. This would force a splitting-off of core identity mental health issues from traditional family agency functions. The option I prefer is to attempt an enriched, integrated, expanded concept of function within our present family agency framework. This is especially relevant as Jewish identity is transmitted via the family group.

In *Ethnicity and Family Therapy* (by M. McGoldrick, J. K. Pierce, and J. Giordano, The Guilford Press, 1982, p. 26.), the authors suggest that one active factor in resistance to the importance of ethnicity, culture and religion by mental health professionals may be a reluctance to define ethnic differences. This resistance is most often displayed by minority group members, according to these authors, who may themselves harbor deep-seated fears of labels and stereotypes, and have, at the core of their resistance, charged personal reactions. Surely, our Jewish mental health professionals have a *dual* inheritance which acts to inhibit creative use of ethnic and religious identity variables in practice:

1. A mental health tradition with a legacy of "neutrality" and preoccupation with "culture-blind" intrapsychic phenomena;
2. Their own identity as members of a sometimes persecuted, ambivalently-regarded minority.

In other words, I agree with Miller's questioning of why we as a field have failed to respond significantly to the crisis of Jewish identity and survival, and I support the search for the complex reasons for this phenomenon. But I disagree with his conclusion, that is, to create a "new concept of function" and a

* Presented as a Response to the Presentation by Charles Miller on the subject of "Jewish Identity and Agency Function" at the Annual Meeting of the Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Kiameska Lake, New York, June 6, 1983. Mr. Miller's paper together with Dr. Bernard Reisman's discussion were published in this Journal, Fall, 1983, V. 60, No. 1, pp. 28-36. See also the Miller-Reisman further exchange of letters which follows in this issue.

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Miller has managed, in his article, to bring to the surface a serious confusion about function and professional role in the Jewish communal field, and his paper makes an important contribution simply by its clarity on this theme. He points to another reason for "the failure to deal more effectively with the identity problem" as a "well intentioned but misplaced emphasis" by a group of professional leaders who have attempted to "influence Jewish communal services toward more positive Jewish objectives and programs." He quotes from the writings of Gerald Bubis and Bernard Reisman, who see Jewish communal services as becoming "Judaizing instruments, using their resources and skills to strengthen the sense of Jewish identity." Bubis, in fact, conceptualizes the Jewish communal worker as a "representative of Judaism and its traditions," and sees agencies, for example, as espousing "a conscious policy against intermarriage." As Miller so clearly notes, this is indeed "an ideological approach which makes inappropriate assumptions about agency function, and is often in conflict with sound professional practice."

Reisman indicates that a change in "professional ideology" is necessary, and "must include a willingness on the part of the worker to be ideologically directive." I strongly suspect that these "ideological imperatives" are not only misguided and in conflict with basic tenets of professional practice—and thus unable to be implemented in a family agency—but the approach is also unsound in terms of what it can *achieve*. Social workers in family agencies understand that change is produced by a therapeutic process which explores, guides, understands and then resolves dysfunctional conflicts, within a framework of a healthy respect for self-determination. Ideological confrontations and

dictates—in contrast to ideological exploration and clarification—not only have no place in this arena, but are counter-productive. As E. H. Friedman, rabbi, psychiatrist, and experienced family therapist, states: "Time and again I have seen a family member's most rigid, culturally based positions change when the emotional process of that family change. But I have never seen the emotional tone, quality, or attitudes of family members change through a direct confrontation on ideological or cultural issues. On the contrary, the latter approach intensifies the deeper emotional issues." (see p. 512, "The Myth of the *Shiksa*," E. H. Friedman, in *Ethnicity and Family Therapy*.)

Apparently, Reisman, Bubis (and perhaps Miller) share an assumption that casework in family service agencies, even if enriched by an integrated connectedness to themes of Jewish identity, cannot produce strengthened Jewish identity without ideological directives. I clearly disagree, and illustrate my view with two brief examples from my own agency which highlight the necessity for functional role clarity, and which underline the impact of the Jewish sponsorship and purpose of the family agency on both its clients and its professional staff:

The JBFCS Cult Clinic treats cult-involved young people and their families. The meaning of Jewish identity to both the young person and his family quickly emerges as a core concern in these cases, in the charged atmosphere of cult involvement. As the therapeutic process unfolds, some young people are ready to discuss ideological and theological concerns with an expert as they explore their own conflicts as Jews during therapy. With a delicate sense of timing, the therapist refers selected cases to a rabbi (drawn from a special panel developed for this project). The therapy continues, but with concurrent rabbinic intervention. Both professionals remain clear about respective functions and role.

Thus far, the Cult Clinic has treated over 100 young adults at various stages of cult involve-

ment. Fully three-fourths of these young people have left the cults during the period of treatment, have sought to repair ties to their families, and are redefined, by themselves, as Jews. The impact of a *Jewish* family agency reaching out to cult victims is immeasurable, but clearly serves to help reconnect marginal young people to the Jewish community.

A *single mother* recently wrote to the JBFCS' Executive Vice-President to convey her gratitude for the help she and her son received from the agency. In the letter, she expressed her feeling of support as an unaffiliated Jewish woman who had never before reached out to the organized Jewish community. Her son's emotional difficulties, the presenting complaint, had abated, and she (and he) had decided, during the course of therapy, that he

would become a Bar Mitzvah, despite their past alienation from Judaism. The mother was especially touched by the agency's financial support to permit a modest Bar Mitzvah celebration. Her letter praised her caseworker for his "sensitivity to the meaning of the Bar Mitzvah" to the family.

As a footnote, illustrative of the power of the Jewish purpose and ambiance of the agency, it is interesting to note that the caseworker was a black young man from a southern state.

Let us always remember that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Twenty-Five Years Ago in this Journal

... what of the "Jewish content" or the "Jewish component" which alone justifies Jewish support of Jewish social services? Once democratic and anti-democratic Jewish values and their more or less consistent components have been differentiated, the "Jewish content" or the "Jewish component" can then be seen as misleading concepts based on the fallacious assumption of the unitary nature of Jewish culture. The problem for Jewish social workers is then not "What is Jewish content" but "What is democratic and what is anti-democratic Jewish content?"

Alfred Kutzik, Fall, 1959