
**A Summary
of the
Findings**

**Social Change
And Response -
Assessing Efforts
To Maximize
Jewish Educational
Effectiveness
In Jewish
Community Centers
In North America**



Social Change and Response: Assessing Efforts to Maximize Jewish Educational Effectiveness in Jewish Community Centers in North America

by Bernard Reisman, Ph.D.

A SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

by Ronald L. Leibow, Chairperson,
JWB Committee on Jewish Education and Continuity

In recent years, JWB and the Jewish Community Centers of North America have undertaken a major effort to build and sustain Jewish continuity. As the JWB Commission on Maximizing Jewish Educational Effectiveness of Jewish Community Centers has proclaimed, the foundation for Jewish continuity is Jewish education, in its broadest, most inclusive sense. *We must infuse Jewish experiences into the programming, the environment, the staffing, the leadership, and the mission of every Center and the Center movement.*

JWB has conducted several studies over the years to measure the Jewishness of Jewish Community Centers, and the attitudes of their executives. Last year, it commissioned Bernard Reisman, Director of the Hornstein Program in Jewish Communal Service at Brandeis University, to conduct a new study. The purpose of the study was to assess the changes which have occurred in the Jewish component of JCC programs and services in the five years since JWB's Commission on Maximizing Jewish Educational Effectiveness of Jewish Community Centers began its work to upgrade Jewish education in JCCs.

The very fact that JWB conducted this study sends important messages to the field. Having independent outside researchers periodically review the functioning of Centers contributes to quality control. Second, focusing the study on the Jewish function of the Center reinforces the awareness of lay and professional leadership of Centers that the national leaders of the Center movement view this as an important issue.

Based on the belief that the Center executive and board chairperson are the catalysts in the maximizing process, the Reisman study focused on Center executives. When senior leaders show that they are serious, the trickle-down effect is impressive. In Centers where concern for Jewish education is a passion of the key professional and lay persons, great

things are happening. Reisman compared data from two studies, conducted in 1982 and 1988, that clearly show the impact of JWB's COMJEE initiative. He also compared current findings with those of the Janowsky Report, which was ahead of its time. Conducted in 1948, that report concluded that "a JCC should have no purpose if it does not contribute to and enhance Jewish continuity."

Reisman asked directors to compare the Jewishness of their Centers now with five years ago. Among other findings, 76% reported that the "overall building's Jewish flavor" was "more Jewish," 69% reported increased "importance of Jewishness among staff," 77% reported "greater collaboration with other Jewish organizations," and 79% reported a greater "extent of Jewish programming."

The Reisman study documents steady progress in upgrading the Jewish component in JCCs today. Further, it suggests that lay and professional leaders, both local and national, need continuing commitment and efforts to sustain the process. Reisman found that a higher level of Jewish educational effectiveness is correlated with the following:

- o More Jewish programming
- o A Jewish education specialist on the staff
- o A lay Jewish education committee responsible for developing guidelines
- o A Jewish educational component in staff development
- o Criteria for board membership that include Jewish commitment and knowledge.

In his report, Dr. Reisman states: "I believe we have come up with findings which are important and which can contribute to the way JCCs operate, and which can help upgrade the Jewishness of JCCs. I believe this is a critical juncture in the history of Jewish Community Centers. For Centers to take on a more explicit Jewish education focus is to respond to important new Jewish interests and needs of the American Jewish community." As chair of the JWB Committee on Jewish Education and Continuity, I strongly agree.

I look forward to receiving your responses to the Reisman study. Your questions and comments, as always, are warmly welcomed.

studied. This could reflect that board programming is not as effective as it might be, or that boards were already at a high level of Jewish identity five years ago.

Asked about the denominational representativeness of the Center's board of directors, 17% of directors said their board was not representative. Orthodox Jews are under-represented. If that is true, we should try to recruit more Orthodox Jews for Center boards so boards would more accurately reflect Jewish denominations. This could also be an important first step toward increasing Orthodox Jewish membership in the Center.

"Secular Jews" are the one group whose members are more involved than their percentage in the population. This group probably includes Jews who are less involved in synagogues or other Jewish organizations. Jewish educational activities would be especially important with this group since the Center may be their only formal Jewish contact.

There seems to be a link between the Jewish component in leadership development and how much importance the staff and board place on the Center's Jewish objectives. We believe that upgrading the Jewish content of leadership development for the Center's board of directors could lead to upgrading the importance of Jewishness in the board's functioning.

Professional Staff: The director's criteria for selecting professional staff are similar to their criteria for selecting board members—the highest priority is given to practical abilities. The two highest ranked qualities are interpersonal skills, chosen by 97% as very important, and pleasant personality, chosen by 72% as very important. As with board members, directors rated Jewish commitment as more important than Jewish knowledge: Jewish commitment was rated third (64%) and Jewish knowledge came in last (26%). In 1988 only 12% of directors gave a high ranking to knowledge of Jewish history, up just 2% from 1948. It is clear that today's Center directors have high expectations that lay and professional leadership should have a positive Jewish attitude and be familiar with contemporary Jewish organizational matters. Their attitude toward Jewish knowledge, however, remains much the same as it was 40 years ago—a low priority. If directors are right in thinking that members come primarily to associate with other Jews, not for Jewish education, then choosing staff for its skill in human relations rather than Jewish knowledge makes sense. "Begin where the members are."

Topping the list of special qualifications for professional staff is "group work skills," chosen by 85% of the 1988 directors, compared to 61% forty years ago. The high ranking in both studies appears to reflect the social work background of most Center directors. The 1988 directors are twice as likely as their 1948 colleagues to expect that JCC staff should be familiar with Jewish religious and organizational life (54% compared to 26%).

Asked about the Jewishness of professional staff

today compared to five years ago, 69% of directors said that Jewishness is more important in the composition and functioning of their Center than it was five years ago. Only 30% say the level of Jewishness is the same. Although the proportion of non-Jewish professional staff in Centers has changed little since 1982, more JCCs now have Jewish education specialists: 29% in 1982, 35% in 1988.

Three staff practices show a significant correlation with a Center's Jewish educational success. Having a Jewish educational specialist on the Center's staff is at the top of the list. The two other practices are inclusion of Jewish content in staff development programs and having staff training programs in Israel.

Comparing professional staff to board members, there are more leadership development programs for professionals (69% vs. 62%), more Jewish content in the programs for professionals (94% compared to 65%), and more Israel-based programs (26% compared to 10%). Surprisingly, given the emphasis leadership development has received in recent years, the percentage of JCCs with leadership development programs for staff is down from 1982: 62% compared to 81%. However, virtually all (94%) the JCCs which do have leadership development now include Jewish content in staff development, compared to 70% in 1982. And Jewish content now occupies more time in these programs than other subjects, 43% compared to 35% in 1982.

The number of Centers which are taking staff to Israel for leadership development programs is growing. In 1988, a quarter of Centers replied that they had a staff training program in Israel within the past two years. Another third said they were planning such a program for the coming years. The value of an Israel educational experience for the staff is very high. While nearly a third of directors say that Center-based programs are "very effective," and nearly all the rest rate them as "effective," the evaluations for Israel-based programs are even more impressive: 87% say they are "very effective," 11% rate them as "effective." Such exceptional evaluations should encourage all JCCs and JWB to give Israel-based education programs for staff a very high priority.

Community Relations: Dr. Reisman's findings show that collaboration between JCCs and other Jewish communal organizations is nearly universal. Although three out of four directors said they are collaborating more than they did five years ago, the increases since 1982 have been small, except for Hillel, which is up to 67% compared to 59% in 1982.

It is generally assumed that JCCs are likely to be more successful in achieving their Jewish goals if they collaborate with other Jewish organizations. However, the Reisman study was unable to confirm this. Only collaboration with the Jewish education coordinating agency shows a moderate level of correlation with Centers achieving Jewish educational effectiveness. Nevertheless, collaboration is an important affirma-

tion of community, and is likely to have other important benefits for the Jewish community.

Jewish Programming: The extent of Jewish programming had the highest statistical correlation with effective achievement of a Center's Jewish objectives. Almost all JCCs now offer programs to celebrate the major Jewish holidays, which are suitable for programming in an informal, recreational agency. Compared to 1982, the extent of Jewish holiday programming is up in 11 of 12 holidays, the one exception being Tisha B'av. The figures range from 95% for Hanukkah to 39% for Yom Yerushalayim. A high proportion of JCCs also offer classes on Jewish subjects. These include Hebrew, Israel, Jewish History, Yiddish, Jewish thought, Bible, and Jewish values. Somewhat fewer Centers offer cultural arts programs (film, dance, drama, art), or other Jewish programs.

Perhaps most important, more than three-quarters (77%) of Centers now have a Jewish education curriculum for their pre-school compared to 43% in 1982. The increase in Centers with Jewish education curriculums suggests that pre-school programs are now considered as a Jewish educational activity rather than a general recreation experience. Given the importance of early childhood years for both parents and children, this Jewish educational experience can have an important impact on the family's Jewish attitudes. It can also lead to a long-term association of the family with the Center.

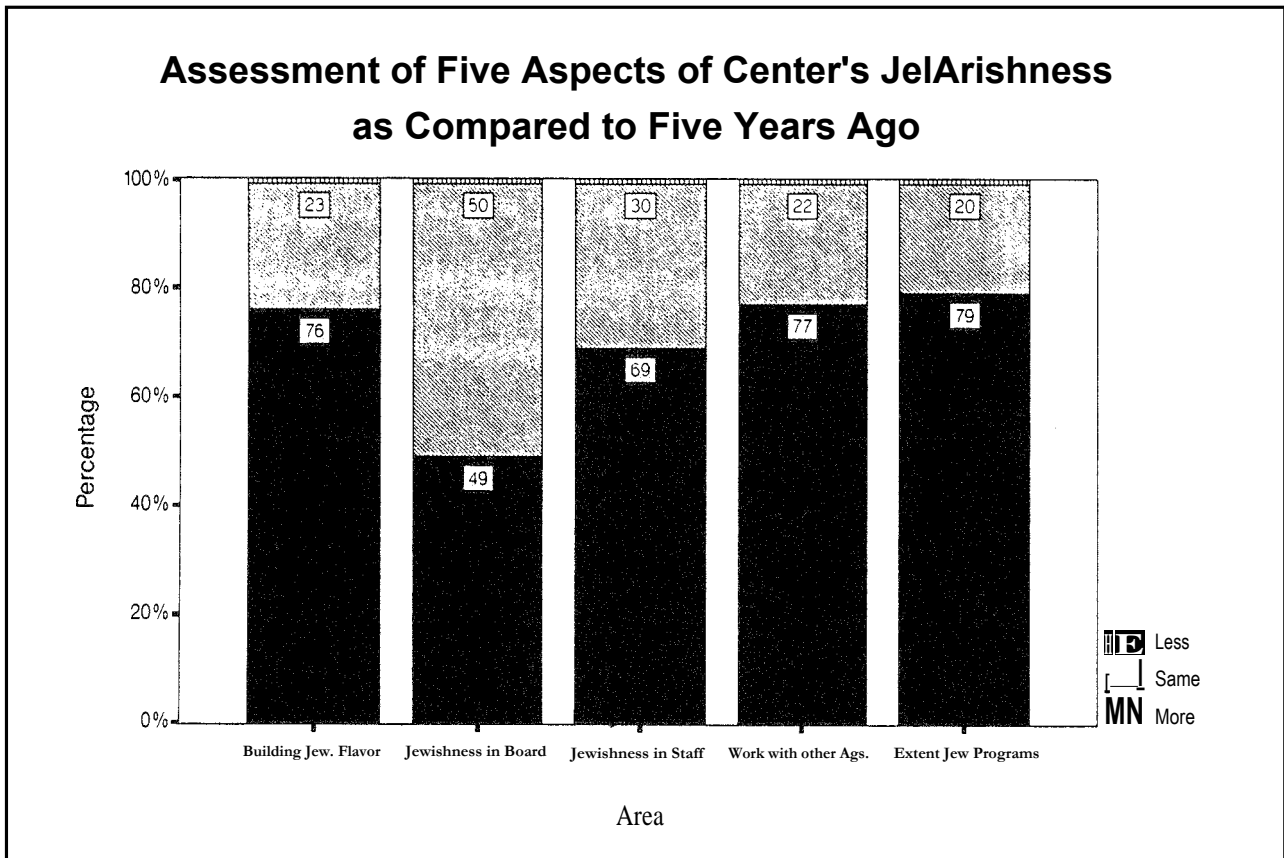
Membership: Obviously, there is a high correlation between "member receptivity to the Center's Jewish

educational objectives" and the effective achievement of Jewish educational objectives. If the members don't care about the Center's Jewish education objectives, efforts to maximize Jewish education will come to nothing. According to the Reisman study, Directors say one-fifth of members are "very receptive," one fifth "not very receptive," and three-fifths "receptive." The important question is whether the staff's Jewish commitment and professional skills can strengthen the Jewish interest of the members.

According to the Directors, members come to Centers for much the same reasons in 1988 as in 1982. The most important reason was "association with other Jews" (94%), followed by "good facilities" (60%). Jewish content of programs was a distant third (38%).

When it comes to the denominational make-up of the membership, the figures for 1982 and 1988 are the same-Orthodox Jews continue to be the most under-represented Jewish religious denomination in Center membership. If the Center movement is to achieve its goal of bringing all Jews together, we will have to start a program of outreach to increase the involvement of Orthodox Jews. In view of the heightened divisiveness in the Jewish community today, efforts to encourage a more representative membership should be given a high priority among Center goals.

The complete report is available on request. Contact Jane Perman, JWB, 15 East 26th Street, New York, NY 10010-1579.



DONALD R. MINTZ
President

ARTHUR ROTMAN
Executive Vice-President

SOLOMON GREENFIELD
Associate Executive Director

15 East 26th Street New York, NY 10010-1579
(212) 532-4949