

A STATEMENT ON PROFESSIONAL  
PRACTICE IN THE JEWISH  
**COMMUNITY CENTER**

BY

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This paper provides an orientation to  
the issues regarding "the type of  
professional" most suited for a position  
in the JCC field.



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# A STATEMENT ON PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE IN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER

## 1 INTRODUCTORY REMARKS: MY BIAS

I have often been accused of romanticizing the past. I began my career in the St. Louis JCC at a time when we had 25 MSW's in the agency with a strong commitment to social group work practice. We even published a book consisting of professional articles written by many of those staff members.

I later became the Executive Director of the Brookline-Brighton-Newton Center in Boston where we had 11 M.S.W.'s including a full-time caseworker on staff. In 1975 I wrote a paper entitled "In Defense of the Psychosocial Orientation in the Jewish Community Center." This was my magnum opus, for it called for a return to the old time religion (of traditional social group work) and reflected my deep commitment to social work practice. It was gratifying to learn that schools of social work and national agencies used this article for training staff. Research, conceptual articles and philosophical issues animated our profession in the early '60's. There was a strong emphasis on the psychosocial orientation to human behavior and there were often diagnostic-case illustration sessions held by JCC staff groups. It was considered a mark of distinction for a center to serve as a graduate school field placement agency. Today I am only one of a handful of members from JCCs of the 10 year old Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups, Inc.

Having confessed my bias to social work practice in Centers and to the environment, content and discipline it stimulated, I must also confess that I am a realist, and thus I offer the thoughts which follow in an attempt to define today's JCC professional in realistic terms suited for the reality of the JCC in the 1990's.

## THE RATIONALE FOR DEFINING TODAY'S JCC PROFESSIONAL: TRANSCENDING DISCIPLINES

Today there is a "JCC professional" that transcends particular disciplines rather than various professionals working in JCCs.

Here are some of the realities. There are only four schools of social work that offer programs in group work. Thus, there are very few group workers graduating. In fact, they are almost an extinct breed. Social work graduates are generic graduates who know little about group work methodology. In the past two decades, professionals from other disciplines have clearly demonstrated that they can make meaningful contributions to Jewish Community Center services. There is a much stronger emphasis now on Jewish education as critical to the Center's mission. Health, fitness, and recreation have become a dominant service in Centers. There is a much stronger emphasis on management of large facilities, budgets and financial planning. The need for technological understanding is greater than ever. Unlike the parents and Center members of the 50's & 60's, today's members do not overtly demand social work practice. An in response, Centers have given them what they want. All of these factors plus many more, dictate the reality that we cannot live in the past. Despite the fact that many Executive Directors continue to be M.S.W.'s, we can no longer say that the social group work discipline is the dominant discipline in the Jewish Community Center. Thus, we must find common criteria/competencies that help us identify a Jewish Community Center professional irrespective of background. Having said this, let me immediately take out a disclaimer Professionalism in a Jewish Community Center is determined not by the fact that one holds a job in the Center - that is an issue of employment - but by the quality of skill and commitment

with which one discharges that job. In other words, the reality is that while many educational backgrounds qualify one for being a "JCC professional", one does not truly become a "JCC professional" until one is professional in his/her daily practice. We must differentiate between a "JCC professional" through employment and a JCC professional through mentality and competence.

### III THE JCC PROFESSIONAL: FIVE KNOWLEDGE LEVELS

One is a JCC professional by virtue of the fact that one works in the JCC and in recognition of an educational and/or training background that prepares one for a JCC job and that includes a variety of backgrounds. But professionalism can only be validated or certified not by job or background but by certain common criteria that bespeaks the essence of professional behavior. I will identify common competencies that qualify one to be a professional in the Center so that one could justifiably call oneself, or be referred to, as a JCC professional, irrespective of educational background or personal training. These competencies, or skill areas, are divided into five criteria I would identify as knowledge levels. One I would identify as a personal-professional, and the others I would identify as skills justifying professionalism.

#### HI A. WHO IS A JCC PROFESSIONAL?

One who understands the Jewish Community Center as a reflection of the evolution of the American Jewish community.

A professional worker in the JCC needs to understand the historical development of the Center in terms of its responsiveness to Jewish communal

ularize the Jewish immigrant community. Upon achieving security and integration into the secular society, the purpose of the Center became reversed - to help Judaize these integrated Americans. Understanding how the Jewish Community Center as an agency within the total Jewish community evolved and mirrors the development of Jewish community life in America is critical in terms of appreciating the Center as part of the organic Jewish community. Centers cannot be viewed as separate unattached organs.

### III B. WHO IS A JCC PROFESSIONAL?

One who understands and who can talk about  
n m rarv Jewish issues.

It is important that professionals in the Center gain insights into contemporary issues and learn how these issues are animated within the Center setting. This concept is based on the belief that Center professionals feel comfortable in engaging in Jewish dialectics so as to present themselves as informed professionals able to stimulate dialogue with others as an educator and facilitator. Those issues might include: Who is a Jew; The Ethics of Zionism; Patrilineal Descent; the Private and Public Response of American Jews to Israeli policies; issues of Inter-marriage; the Israel Response to Intifada; Major Dilemmas in Jewish Life, etc., the convent at Auschwitz, Germany reunited, etc.

### HI C. WHO IS A JCC PROFESSIONAL?

One who can f  
communal personality.

Each community has a distinct personality. Professional workers need to have some analytic ability to discern one community from the other from the perspective of a professional. Some of these criteria would include:

- a. Levels of leadership - mentality of leadership.
- b. Interaction patterns between agencies.
- c. The power structure - how are decisions made in the community.
- d. How do we identify strengths of the respective agencies?  
Socioeconomic character of the community.
- f. The level of Jewish commitment and how it is expressed.
- g. The planning process in the community.
- h. The philanthropic character of the community.  
Levels of professional leadership and interaction among professionals.

### III D. YVHO ISA JCC PROFESSIONAL?

#### One who appreciates the Jewish value orientation of the Jewish Community Center.

The Center is a transmitter of Jewish values and agent for value education. It is important that professionals understand and learn Jewish values embraced by the Center and how they can be translated into its program. They might include such items as:

- a. Community responsibility. This involves helping lay leadership develop a proprietary commitment to the agency. It is particularly important now as we face the next generation of the manager mentality who unlike his or her parents may not feel the need to give something back to the community.
- b. Tzedakah. Programmatically and philosophically this value can be expressed

creatively in the Center with children and adults alike.

Social justice. Response of the Center historically to human rights, civil rights, poverty, the homeless and other social injustices can be portrayed in both programmatic and policy terms to demonstrate the value of social justice within the Center.

- di Pluralism, peace, unity, "shalom bayit". If ever there was a time the Center needed to transmit values in this area, it is now. The Center's commitment to pluralism helps expose people to diverse points of view. The importance of embracing Jews from all perspectives needs to be appreciated by professional workers as an important value dimension. Particularly now that religious conflict creates almost a schism in Jewish life the concept of pluralism embraced by the Center becomes almost a theology unto itself precisely because of its contra-distinction to the destructiveness and divisiveness of religious conflict.
- e. Family stability. This would include the Center's role in reinforcing our traditional commitment to family stability particularly in view of the startling sociological and demographic statistics with which we are all familiar. Jewish learning. The Center's role in transmitting the value of Jewish education is surely a critical component for professional practice. The concept of Jewish learning as distinct from episodic lectures and the ability to implement Jewish learning programs that can be enduring and impactful is a most critical value dimension that needs to be embraced by professionals

## **D E. WHO IS A JCC PROFESSIONAL?**

This is the item mentioned earlier which is on the personal level.

The JCC Association has produced a magnificent document entitled "Guide to Jewish Knowledge for the Center Professional" by Barry Chazan and Yehiel Poupko. It describes the vision of the Jewish personality that would be viewed as desirable for Center professionals. I urge everyone here to read this document carefully because it is non-judgmental and yet suggests standards, something which isn't easy to do. I am not going to repeat the contents of this document; I would only ask you to study and incorporate the six desirable qualities that they identify. They include a learning person, a literate person, a person with a distinctive lifestyle - or who has a specific philosophy, a valuing person, a searching person, and a caring person. Of the six, I would only include a paragraph on the literate person because it illustrates how they have succinctly defined each of these six desirable qualities. In regard to a literate person, the document says; "Give us our part in the great enterprise of Torah."

Judaism is a vast treasure of events, sources, ideas, beliefs, practices and aesthetic creations and it constitutes one of humanity's great intellectual and cultural legacies. There are many ways to begin to study this heritage and it is accessible to all. At the same time, it is vast, and the study of Judaism requires time and patience. There are no short cuts or quick routes to becoming Jewishly literate. Jewish literacy means a basic familiarity with key phrases, ideas, concepts, texts, and moments in the Jewish experience. Just as modern Center professionals should be literate in

general language and culture, so should they be literate in the great tradition of which they are part. Being Jewish includes the commitment to the joy and value of reading books and articles and journals and ideas of worth.

To put it bluntly, it is difficult for me to conceive of anyone justifying the term professional if they are committed to remain Jewishly illiterate.

#### IV: The JCC Professional : Eight Basic Skill Requirements

There are eight basic skill-requirements, transcending professional disciplines that are critical in identifying the common criteria for professionalism worthy of being called a Jewish Community Center professional.

##### Skill # 1      Facilitative L      gabbio

This is the one enduring concept that governs our purposes philosophically and our practice methodically. It is the underlying credo that goes to the heart of our very existence. It permeates every facet of our work and it is a universal principle that guides our practice. is the skill to help people make  
through the belief      rmin. \* n

The circumvention of this process for the sake of expedience because of subjective ego needs is a liability that we cannot afford in our Centers. Too often, workers talk too much, provide solutions, and dominate discussions because of their own need: rather than measuring their words, selecting their interventions, and having faith in the ability of individuals and groups to consider options and make decisions.

## Skill #2. Self-discipline

This skill is somewhat related to the skill of facilitative leadership. Too often we see professionals sidestep process to gain personal recognition rather than enabling other people to gain recognition by helping them execute for themselves. This is a problem of control of egos needs. Any attempt to define maturity is like leading with one's chin. Here we must distinguish between behavioral levels that are deemed appropriate based on our conceptual understanding of the stages of human growth and development and behavior which we believe is residual in the sense that it lags behind chronological age and all the responsibility and challenges that go with it. Symptoms of adolescent behavior in professionals often reflect this lag between assumed responsibilities of age and emotional readiness for professional activity. Symptoms of heightened defensiveness, over-reaction to authority, and unbalanced emotional responses mirror adolescent remnants that obstruct professional practice. Each worker in each Center needs to understand what constitutes appropriate and mature professional behavior and to measure their definitions against their own behavior so that this self-awareness would enable them to understand how they are viewed by others and how they may be able to adjust their behavior reaching towards maturity.

## Skill # 3 Conceptual Skills

The excitement of the Jewish Community Center is that it affords opportunities for individual creativity and the unique character of each Center is reflected in the distinct person-

ality and professional output of its staff. For this reason the importance of conceptual skills is paramount. The capacity for meaningful professional activity hinges on the worker's ability to formulate notions based on a conceptual understanding of the needs of people, community, and the goals of the agency. The key is the worker's ability to relate his professional activity to a targeted need, identified through observation and definition. In Centers, one would hope that programs flow from the diagnosis of social, educational and cultural needs and the formulation of an idea or concept that would help meet these needs through the vehicle of program. I call it program targeting rather than helter skelter brochure listings. The conceptual oriented worker selects his programs on the basis of thinking related to needs and then forms an idea. The non-conceptually oriented worker fills brochures with activities that may be enjoyable but are selected helter skelter. Too often, and perhaps understandably, workers become absorbed with the busyness or business of getting a job done. However, it is not difficult to differentiate between the worker who carries with him conceptual learning, articulates it and applies it in his work from the worker who surrenders the opportunity to formulate ideas based on theory, yielding to the expedience of completing tasks in the role of a functionary.

#### Skill # 4 ommuniication skills

In all sectors of Jewish Community Center work, the effectiveness of the worker is significantly influenced by the force and fluency of his communication skills.

In our work, the formulation of ideas is tested and refined in the process of interfacing with others. If an idea cannot be communicated effectively, then opportunities for implementation will be limited. Many of our new workers are bright and capable but have problems in stretching their thoughts to give them wholeness and to score points in promoting an idea. In some cases, there is almost a monosyllabic quality to their presentations and they are frustrated in not being able to reach and inspire others. There is no mystery to the fact that written presentations of conceptual material is often threatening to young workers and it is disappointing to note the decline in published articles by JCC professionals. Further, the worker's role as an advocator for the rights and needs of others is based on his skill as a communicator. His abilities to intervene as a practitioner and to influence as an educator are also measured by his skills as a communicator. In today's world, it is not shameful to learn the skills of effective salesmanship while preserving our own ethical commitments. We are in the business of ideas and services and the structure of the Jewish welfare system often places us in the position of persuasive communication of concepts of services to others, be it a supervisor, committee, or board.

### Skill # 5 jiagu1iQ Skills

Schools of education, recreation, social work, Jewish education, early childhood education do not provide enough experience and opportunity in the development of diagnostic skills. The agencies, on the other hand, do not seem to be making great demands in this area particularly as we have become so technical,

so management oriented, so task centered. I'm not suggesting that we all become Freudian experts. What I am saying is that Freud and others teach us to be analytically oriented in terms of understanding people and groups and what they are saying and how they are functioning.

Diagnostic skills would also help bring back the concept of individualization in Centers because it would also be committing us to the principle that it is important to understand people better. The development of diagnostic skills, which I believe is sorely lacking among professionals in Centers is a subject that can be creatively built into staff training sessions and it can be done with much enjoyment.

#### Skill # 6     Intprv n iv **kill**

The educator who teaches that errors of commission are better than errors of omission contributes to professional practice. Workers need to be trained to risk and to have faith in the resilience of people who can survive their errors of positive motivation. We need to encourage staff members to have a plan of action before a group or committee meeting so that they develop a kind of anticipatory preparation. To be sure, there are many occasions where we cannot anticipate signals for intervention but we can be trained to react more reflexively on a professional level. We must also understand that intervention is borne out of the skills of diagnosis, conceptualization and communication and they are not only the sole responsibility of a social worker. The obsession with management, facilities, and technology often distracts us or even undermines our commitment to recognizing that ultimately the way in which

we help people is by intervening with some degree of "intentionality" in dealing with people's needs, in the hallways, in committee meetings, in groups and in relationships.

### Skill # 7      Organization Skills

We need to spend more time in our agencies dealing with subjects related to time management, organizational techniques, strategic planning, prioritizing job tasks, etc. Particularly, with young workers it is rare that at some point we do not hear complaints of feeling "overwhelmed" and often times these complaints are justified. Anxiety about juggling multifaceted responsibilities in our work is also commonplace. The relationship between organizational-administrative ability and the fulfillment of job requirements is a crucial one. Some workers have native ability in this area but there are also many workers who need help in organizing their thoughts and working with less stress as they juggle work responsibilities.

### Skill # 8      Jewish Practice Skills

We have learned that knowledge, empathy and commitment help define the meaning of being a good Jewish Community Center worker. We must now identify execution as an essential skill in defining an effective Center worker. Knowledge and feelings are necessary but inadequate if they cannot be translated into service.

any workers at all levels have knowledge and commitment and in some cases even personal piety, but lack the other skills aforementioned and are thus ineffective in execution. The mission of Jewish objectives, therefore, is inextricably

related to the basic fundamental skill of professional practice. A worker with a strong Jewish commitment but lacking in organizational and diagnostic skills is limited in what he can achieve as a practitioner even though his heart may be in the right place. A Jewishly committed Center worker is ineffective if he does not have the skills to market and engineer an important cultural program. To the executive, a most impressive feature of any staff worker is when there is evidence in his work output that he selected a Jewish agency because he feels a sense of Jewish mission and is able to satisfy this commitment through effective competence at implementation.

#### V. IN SUMMATION: ON BECOMING A JCC PROFESSIONAL

In this paper, I have identified some of the skills and levels of knowledge which are crucial in enabling someone to being justifiably referred to as a Jewish unity Center professional. When these levels are achieved, and one recognizes oneself as a professional, one is then ready to make the difference as a professional.

When I presented these thoughts at a more formal meeting with a group of young staff members a few years ago, one of the reactions received was: "but Dave, we cannot be supermen and superwomen; what you're asking for is impossible." Let me state very clearly what my intention is in identifying these skills. I do not expect all workers to be perfect in all of these areas. But it is crucial that we have some standards towards which we can reach. Very few of us, myself included, would receive an "A" in all of these skills. But we must at least understand on an intellectual level what

these skills are in order for us to confidently identify ourselves as Jewish Center professionals irrespective of our professional training. We don't always have good supervisors who could mirror professional standards and who could give us something to reach towards. We need to have our own formulas to understand and measure ourselves against standards that we establish, to be an effective Jewish Center professional.

## VI A PLEA TO MY PEERS: OVERCOME THE BARRIERS

One final comment. There is so much that is happening in our agencies that can pervert and subvert the challenge of functioning as a professional by focusing on these basic skills. Many of us have become technocrats because technocracy can succeed in our field today in terms of survival.

There are forces at play that can derail and diminish us. The demand for production, our bigness, supervision that may not set high standards, bureaucracy, the inadequacy of college and graduate education, our consuming obsession with numbers instead of people, falling into the trap of becoming technocrats instead of practitioners, etc. It is not difficult to be an ordinary worker in our industry and many of us can survive with our ordinariness.

But ultimately, we must answer to ourselves.

The extraordinary worker recognizes those forces which can compromise and diminish us and overcomes them because he understands what professional standards really mean. The ordinary worker succumbs to these diminishing forces because of either his values or lack thereof; because he does not have the capacity to conceive of professional standards, or doesn't want to know them because he would then have to work

at becoming extraordinary. Ultimately as we engage in self reckoning, I believe the ordinary worker feels greater frustration and dissatisfaction in his work because he has not allowed himself to reach towards excellence. Fortunately, we have some extraordinary people who are aware of standards, common criteria, and definitions of professionalism that override educational disciplines. These are the people that justifiably define a mature JCC professional. They retain the basics; they have intellectual curiosity; they are concerned with issues; they work at conceptualization, communication, organization and maturity. Their commitment is unswerving. They overcome. In the years ahead, let us hope we can expand their ranks and in the process strengthen our resolve to make a difference and elevate our profession in the process.

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