

Training for the "Jewish" in Jewish Family Life Education

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The concept of "relativity of values" i.e. that there can be a variety of positions in relation to a given issue, none of which has an inherent presumption of superiority, is an important professional commitment, linked to the ethical caveat of client self-determination. While mental health professionals non-judgmentally affirm the right of individuals to adopt values which differ from their own, (provided that the values chosen respect the life and well-being of others), they in fact tend to feel that the values which structure their own life choices are "correct" in an absolute, rather than in a relative sense.

DURING the past two decades, in response to trends in the Jewish community such as increased intermarriage and divorce, and declining Jewish population, many Jewish communal organizations have developed Jewish Family Life Education programs which include discussion of Jewish values, beliefs and practices. Even the most "universalist" of Jewish agency leadership has reassessed previous convictions about the desirability of assimilation, and has begun to see enhancement of Jewish identity and affiliation by means of JFLE groups as a possible remedial measure to provide additional support to Jewish families at predictable points of life-cycle stress (marriage, the birth of a child, retirement etc), and teach about Jewish values and family observances.¹

Jewish Family Life Education as a modality is well-suited for this task. Experience has shown that Jewish education programs attended in one's youth have some effect on subsequent Jewish identity and participation,² but it is the Jewish family which largely teaches and

transmits this.³ Jewish Family Life Education is effective because it provides emotional support and promotes attitude change, as well as facilitating cognitive learning. The experiential component of JFLE is immediately relevant to the needs of adult learners.⁴

Incorporating Jewish content into JFLE workshops has been especially difficult for professionals in the family and children's agency. Some workers have conceptualized their clinical tasks in culturally non-specific terms, and this orientation carries over into the JFLE groups they conduct.

Similarly, some agency administrators have mistakenly thought that to enhance Jewish identity for clients (and staff) means they have to make their programs conform to Jewish religious practice, something they are appropriately not prepared to do.⁵

Even when an agency's leadership is committed to enhancing Jewish identity as part of the services offered, there has been considerable difficulty integrating such concern with Jewish Family Life Education workshops.

When agencies have offered JFLE workshops or have sponsored training programs for staff co-led by a rabbi and a mental health professional, integration has been elusive. At best, open

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conflict is avoided, but how much actual change occurs in the attitudes, values and Jewish affiliation of participants in JFLE groups, or in the ability of staff to incorporate Jewish content into their work remains difficult to assess.⁶

JFLE manuals, guides, workshop outlines, bibliographies and other curriculum aids have been compiled for workers who lead such groups, again with varying degrees of success.⁷ The focus of such materials has been on Jewish values, the Jewish historical experience or the Jewish holiday cycle treated in a general way. There has been, however, regrettably little material of direct relevance to the JFLE practitioner concerned with enhancing Jewish identity as an essential component of individual, family, and communal mental health, and almost no evaluative research regarding the effectiveness of this material in accomplishing the goals and purposes of JFLE.⁸

At the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services of New York we have developed a three-session module entitled "Using Jewish Content" as part of our training seminar for JFLE group leaders. The goal of this module is to sensitize JFLE leaders to the importance of a Jewish component in the curriculum of JFLE workshops. It helps them identify several important factors which make the "J" component most relevant, but hard to accomplish, and provides them with beginning skills and resources to enable them to overcome the difficulties.

A description of our JFLE program and this training module follows:

JFLE at JBFCS

JFLE is the primary means by which the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services implements its commitment to community education, a

service which complements our clinical and social services, training and research activities. More than 300 JFLE lectures and multi-session series are offered each year, to make knowledge and expertise derived from the agency's clinical programs available to "normal" individuals, couples, and families, to assist them in negotiating life in the eighties—its opportunities, stresses, developmental and societal changes. During 1982-83, more than 5,000 people attended JFLE programs sponsored by the New York JBFCS.

The JFLE program at JBFCS is coordinated by an MSW social worker who both stimulates and responds to requests for programs from co-sponsoring host organizations in the community. The actual JFLE workshops and groups are led by more than forty MSW- or PhD-level professional staff from the agency's out-patient and residential treatment programs.

Funding for our JFLE program is provided by a grant from the New York Federation of Jewish Philanthropies and fees charged to participants in the programs or to the co-sponsoring host organizations.

In addition to individual and group supervision by the project coordinator, a twelve-session in-service training seminar helps workers who lead JFLE groups integrate the many components of the facilitator's role. The curriculum of our JFLE seminar teaches participants "standard" FLE skills such as, "principles of adult education;" "curriculum design;" "group process in short-term educational groups;" etc. Three sessions of this training seminar focus on integrating Jewish content into JFLE.

Bringing Jewish Content into JFLE Workshops

The Jewish-content module of our JFLE training seminar covers four top-

ics, which are addressed in lectures, experiential exercises and group discussion. The four components are:

- I. Why does JFLE need a "J"?
- II. Why is it so hard to do?
- III. What can we do to make it easier?
- IV. What are some specific ways that Jewish content can be used appropriately in JFLE?

A necessary prerequisite to the discussion is for the seminar leader to help staff participants express how they feel about incorporating cultural and religious elements into their JFLE workshops, i.e. to examine how their own ethnic background influences their lives and how they have made use of this aspect of "self" in their professional activities.

As in an actual JFLE group, the seminar leader must take prior knowledge and receptivity of the participants into account because of highly-charged feelings which can emerge. Not all practitioners share the agency's conviction that Jewish content should be incorporated into JFLE workshops. Some group leaders have negative or ambivalent feelings towards their own or another cultural group.

Under such circumstances, if a JFLE group participant chose to identify him/herself with a particular ethnic or religious lifestyle, anxiety, hostility or indifference might be engendered in the group leader, making it difficult for the group to explore issues objectively and thoroughly.⁹ For example:

Mr. R. a Jewish social worker, said his being Jewish made no practical difference in his life, and was a mere "accident" of birth. He was however known to be active in an "anti-Zionist" organization. Mr. R. took issue with the seminar leader's suggestion that using Jewish content might enrich the discussion in a JFLE group. He claimed to have led a number of very successful JFLE groups on the topic of "The Middle Years", and could

not recall ever encountering participant interest in specifically Jewish issues.

In a subsequent seminar session at which participants were asked to recall a significant "Jewish" memory, Mr. R. related his experience as a member of a highschool team, whose faculty coach belonged to a militant neo-Nazi organization. Mr. R. recalled feeling threatened, fearful and very angry at having to conceal the fact that he was Jewish from the teacher, since he wanted to belong to the team, which provided him with acceptance and praise by his peers.

Discomfort or ambivalence towards the Jewish component of JFLE on the part of the facilitator sometimes appears as resistance in the seminar, e.g. absence from or lateness to sessions and questioning relevance of topics under discussion.

Behind the apparent resistance however, there often is legitimate confusion regarding professional role and boundaries. Participants voice concern that to use Jewish content means that basic professional values such as "self-determination" or "maintaining a non-authoritarian stance", have to be compromised; or that the professional will be required to act as a clergyman or "missionary".

The seminar leader must be very supportive of worker concerns and help the group realize that the sole purpose of using Jewish content in JFLE is to complement the reasons why the agency sponsors such groups in the first place, (i.e. to help parents raise their children, to help spouses improve their marriage, to assist individuals and families cope with stress, manage the dual-career family, plan for retirement etc.).

Jewish content which is relevant to these tasks and topics and which validates the connection between cultural participation and enhanced functioning can be discussed in a JFLE group. No other agenda should be grafted on.

Also, workers can be reassured that acquiring knowledge of Jewish values,

beliefs, or practices, and how they relate to the JFLE topic under discussion, does not mean that the group leader has to change his/her own *lifestyle* in anyway, (i.e. becomes *more* or *less* 'Jewish'), unless (s)he chooses to do so.

As "participants" in the JFLE groups they lead, workshop leaders have the opportunity to explore feelings and enhance their own consciousness about Jewish issues. As leaders, however, they have a responsibility to maintain a tone of empathy, non-judgement, and open-mindedness, so that the group as a whole and each individual group-member can engage with the issues at hand, sort out how it feels, and decide what relevance the Jewish content may have for their particular life-circumstances.

At the initial session of the Jewish-content training, Ms. K, an experienced worker who had led parenting groups for many years, expressed concern that in presenting Jewish family values, she not be required to give up her commitment to "the equality of all people", which she felt Jewish tradition did not share.

Although Ms. K. described herself as Jewishly committed in "her own way", she could not accept Judaism's prohibition against Jews and gentiles marrying each other. Ms. K. stated that it would be wrong for a mental health professional to support this value.

Another worker in the group asked Ms. K. whether she could accept that others might feel differently. Ms. K. answered that she could, but her statement seemed to lack conviction.

When Ms. K's ambivalence was confronted by the seminar leader, she voiced anger and outrage at the parents of one of her clients, who forced their daughter to stop dating a non-Jewish man, at what seemed to be considerable cost to the client's emotional well-being. Although the young woman's parents were not very observant of Jewish tradition, they threatened to cut off contact with their daughter were she to continue in the relationship. This struck Ms. K. as being arbitrary, hypocritical and unfair. Her feelings of being stifled and coerced by this example of Jewish "bigotry", were reflected back and accepted by the seminar group.

Additional discussion revealed that there were complicating factors in the relationship between the young woman and her parents, as well as serious difficulties in the relationship between Ms. K's client and her gentile boyfriend.

The group's supportive stance towards Ms. K. however enabled her to move beyond her over-identification with the coerced young woman and to see that for her to facilitate a JFLE discussion of Judaism's caveat regarding marriage within group did not mean that she, or any other person *had* to accept such a restriction in their own personal relationships. Ms. K. much relieved, noted that she would never date a non-Jewish man, since she did not want to open that "Pandora's box".

A JFLE facilitator's ability to engage openly with Jewish material, without unrecognized preconceptions and distortions, will enhance her/his ability to help JFLE group participants consider its relevance in their own lives.

Understanding one's own culturally based values and biases are therefore very much within the framework of self-awareness required of a mental health professional and enhances the self-determination of those being served.

After discussing and working through these issues, our training group begins to address the questions raised above (why does JFLE need a "J"? What makes it so hard to do? What can we do to make it easier? etc.).

Why Does JFLE Need a "J" ?

a. *Ethnicity As A Component of Mental Health & Social Adjustment*

In recent years, the importance of positive cultural and religious identity for mental health and self-esteem has been increasingly realized. Nowadays we understand that membership in one's cultural group conveys a "basic group identity", which:

— provides a sense of historical rootedness.

- defines a base of values.
- helps answer existential questions relating to life's purpose and meaning.
- and contains powerful messages with implications for self-esteem and self-acceptance.¹⁰

So accepted is this proposition that it would be unusual for a mental health professional nowadays to maintain that professional services can take place in an ethnic vacuum. In observing actual *practice*, however, one notes that cultural and religious factors are brought into professional activity minimally, if at all.¹¹

Variables such as feeding, toilet-training, discipline, and the ways in which dependency, aggression, intimacy and other dynamic factors are socialized, are crucial for emotional and social adjustment and are decidedly culturally influenced. Mental health workers, however, rarely enter into the emotional meaning of these dynamics as they reflect the style and reality of the particular culture in which they occur.

This is a serious omission in therapy, and likewise seems critical in relation to (J)FLE, where the particular concern is to teach people about the determinants of mental health and social adjustment such as "parenting", "negotiating developmental changes", "enhancing marriage relationships". JFLE *must* include a cultural and religious component if it is to help participants connect with a historically-validated system of values and practices. To omit discussion of particular Jewish values in JFLE groups is to, in effect, endorse by default the values and guidelines of the majority culture. This presumably renders Jewish participants more vulnerable to those individual and family problems which historically were not part of the Jewish experience.

The JFLE group leader can inform group participants about the options available to them in relation to a particular life-cycle issue. To avoid discussion of the Jewish perspective on child-rearing for example, or how participation in Jewish cultural and religious activities can enhance family harmony and interpersonal relationships—because of a lack of familiarity, or because of discomfort with these issues based on value conflicts, diminishes the effectiveness of the JFLE experience.

Thus, rather than the peripheral issue it is sometimes felt to be, Jewish cultural and religious content in JFLE is an important and essential feature of this modality.

b. *Current Jewish Communal Agenda*
Current concerns in the Jewish community such as those about intermarriage, increasing divorce and declining Jewish population is a second answer given to seminar participants regarding why Jewish agencies wish to incorporate Jewish content into JFLE programs. While a particular JFLE leader may personally disagree with this concern, in view of the fact that JFLE is part of the *prevention* function of our family and children's agency, an appropriate part of the JFLE leader's role is to relate family life issues to their broader communal context, as well as to see them in their more particular clinical manifestations.

A brief lecture and group discussion regarding this aspect of JFLE center on the implications for the JFLE leader, with, when necessary, additional reassurance of the agency's commitment to appropriate professional boundaries and role. Translating Jewish communal concerns about declining population into, for example, a discussion of the modern Jewish woman, can include such issues as the options for self-fulfillment which career and motherhood each

represent, the realities of trying to manage nowadays on a one-paycheck income, as well as traditional Jewish values regarding family roles. How particular workshop participants translate such concern into their own lives remains basically their own affair.

c. *The Importance Of The Family In The Development Of Cultural and Religious Identity*

The importance of *the family* in promoting a positive cultural and religious identity is a third reason why a "J" is needed in JFLE. This further reinforces the notion that JFLE, which is concerned with family-life issues, has an important role to play in this regard. An individual's attitudes towards life, his or her values and self-image, develop within the ethnic framework of the family and cannot be separated from it arbitrarily. Cultural and religious identity develop very early in life, and are learned through emotional and sensory experiences (sights, sounds, smells, characteristic ways of acting and reacting).

A powerful sense of "rightness" and "fit" are conveyed to the developing child, usually through the child's interaction with parents, and especially grandparents. In our pluralistic, open society, however, ethnic loyalties may undergo significant modification due to the influence of peers, teachers, and other non-familiar role models.

Since the family remains the more significant determinant of whether the child develops a positive or negative sense of him/herself as a member of a particular cultural or religious group, JFLE can help Jewish families explore this aspect of their lifestyle specifically but non-coercively, so that they can avoid attitudes of Jewish "self-hatred" for themselves and their children.

Building Emotional Acceptance

Casting the Jewish component of JFLE in these practical and functional terms, within a framework of respect for professional values, reinforces its relevance and allows professionals in our training seminar to feel a commitment to discussing Jewish cultural and religious issues in their JFLE groups.

As the group acquires an intellectual acceptance of the importance of the Jewish dimension, we present an experiential exercise which asks each seminar participant to recall a significant cultural or religious memory from his/her growing-up years, preferably one which may have determined how they currently feel about their ethnicity. The purpose of the exercise is to reinforce what has been taught about cultural and religious elements in JFLE on an *emotional* level.

Seminar participants share their memories with the group. The seminar leader elicits the meaning of the experiences to the person to whom it occurred and encourages other seminar participants to add their perceptions and comments. Such discussions are extremely helpful for both Jewish and *non-Jewish* JFLE leaders—to sort out negative and (self)-deprecatory perceptions, as well as any unexamined chauvinistic notions of superiority. Beginning with a discussion of past issues can enable seminar participants then to talk about how they presently relate to their ethnic identity, and to share current issues and concerns:

Mr. A. a non-Jewish JFLE leader told the seminar group of his surprise upon moving to New York, and encountering a vibrant, religiously pluralistic, and multi-national Jewish community.

Growing up in Montana, Mr. A. always thought that the Jews constituted a more-or-less homogenous group who had pretty much

ceased to exist many hundreds of years ago. The members of the small Protestant sect to which he and his family belonged, considered themselves to be the "Children of Israel", referred to in the bible.

Mr. A. was further surprised to learn that most of the Jews whom he met in New York City, were much-less knowledgeable about the bible and religion than he was. He initially perceived their Jewish identity as "inauthentic".

When he began to understand that "Jewish" identity includes cultural and ethnic components, as well as religious affiliation, Mr. A. had to sort out his feelings about belonging to a religious group which also defined itself as the modern-day "Hebrews" (in the Biblical sense of being "chosen"). Mr. A. was then able to individualize his non-religious Jewish clients and more accurately assess the role of Jewishness in their lives.

Mr. A. developed a rather humorous lecture about his experiences in learning about Jews and Judaism, which he used most effectively in the JFLE groups he led. His contributions to the JFLE seminar helped relieve some of the anxiety aroused by discussion of ethnicity issues, although one Jewish worker was uncomfortable with what he characterized as Mr. A's being forced, as he put it, to "sing for his supper".

However, most seminar participants agree that expressing positive and negative feelings, giving and receiving support and validation to and from other group members, and hearing how others' experience were/are both similar to and different from one's own, facilitates learning and adds a personal commitment to discussing cultural and religious elements in Family Life Education groups.¹²

The exercise itself is readily transferable to actual JFLE groups and thus provides seminar participants with an effective experiential technique for initiating discussion of Jewish issues.

So Why Is it so Hard to Do?

Staff members in our JFLE seminar cite a number of reasons why it is dif-

ficult to make use of Jewish content in JFLE workshops, including the reasons noted above (lack of agreement as to its importance, confusion about professional role, lack of participant interest). One factor, however, which perhaps underlies all the others, is never identified: this being the question of values, and more specifically, the way values function psychologically to bind anxiety.

Although values are the attitudes, beliefs and perceptions which determine choices and actions, they are largely pre-conscious and implicit until purposefully examined. This is why values "clarification" is an important part of JFLE. That there can be several value positions in relation to a given issue—the concept of relativity of values—is an important professional commitment, linked to the caveat of self-determination. While mental health workers affirm the right of individuals to adopt values which differ from their own, they tend to feel the values which structure their own life-choices are "correct" in an *absolute*, rather than in a *relative* sense.

Traditional Jewish values are generally prescriptive to a significantly greater degree than the values of the secular American and academic communities (especially in mental health theory), from which many mental health professionals draw their moral and ethical norms. Jewish tradition, particularly Jewish religious tradition, structures and directs many areas of life which other systems leave to individual choice. People who are committed to such core values as privacy, autonomy, independence and individual freedom, experience conflict with Judaism's greater emphasis on family and community, and even more so in regard to Judaism's efforts to structure choices and actions in the personal areas of diet, work and leisure, marriage and

sexuality. Authentic Jewish values can stimulate anxiety for a JFLE leader and for group participants, based on a perceived loss of control, with resulting misunderstanding and distortion.¹³

This is a potent countertransference issue. Such feelings are rarely conscious. They tend to be repressed along with the anxiety which accompanies them. The result quite predictably is that only those aspects of Jewish tradition which seem consonant with the group leader's value system enter discussion of the JFLE group. It becomes psychologically easier for the worker (and for many group participants) when *no aspect* of Jewish tradition is discussed in a JFLE group, except in a superficial or syncretistic fashion.

What Can We do to Make it Easier?

Group discussion, recalling past experiences, and clarifying value concerns regarding Jewish issues with full respect for self-determination, enables JFLE seminar trainees to focus on the opportunity for enhancing JFLE groups by using Jewish content.

In recent years much Judaica/mental health resource material on topics of interest to the JFLE group leader has been published, and there has been, as well, a voluminous output of primary Jewish sources translated into English, with helpful and authentic commentary. We have purchased and catalogued as much of this material as resources have permitted and are able to make specific suggestions to workers regarding their interests and needs. We also maintain a file of workshop outlines developed by our JFLE leaders which can be used or adapted to a particular worker's ability, style and sense of what will be most effective with a given JFLE group.

These concrete resources along with a supportive and encouraging attitude,

enables many JFLE practitioners to try "something Jewish" at least one time. Additional support and encouragement are given in individual supervision, as well as in periodic administrative sessions which we organize for our JFLE leaders as a group.

Specific Areas for Use of Jewish Content

We have identified six areas where Jewish content can be integrated with mental health theory to enrich our JFLE groups. While not all of these areas can necessarily be brought into every workshop, it is the rare JFLE program which could not make use of *some* aspect of Jewish activity or content in relation to the following:

1. *Jewish identity*—religious, cultural, ethnic, political philanthropic etc.
2. *Jewish values*—traditional and evolving,—charity, education, responsibility, compassion, sense of individual and social justice.
3. *Jewish "life-skills"*—for the individual, family and community e.g. how to *davin*, run a Seder or Shabbat meal etc.
4. *Jewish rites of passage*—birth and birth ceremonies, Jewish education, Bar- and Bas-Mitzvah, marriage, parenthood, bereavement etc.
5. *Jewish history*, languages, culture, texts.
6. *Jewish families coping with high-stress situations* e.g.—Jewish single parents, parents of Jewish children with special needs (mental, emotional or physical impairment), intermarried couples—their parents and children, the unaffiliated.)

Conclusion

While no JFLE group leader need feel under pressure to make use of Jewish content, that the opportunity to

do so not be missed or dismissed out of hand is the goal towards which our efforts are directed.

Workers in Jewish communal agencies have an important role to play in helping American Jews reconnect with the Jewish cultural and religious heritage in ways which are relevant to their current life circumstances. This is the task which is before us.

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