

The New "Unique Function" of the Jewish Community Center*

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While I suggest that the Jewish community centers of North America cannot be credited with "unique institutional functions" this does not mean that a Jewish community center cannot play a unique and very significant role in a particular community. But so can a particular family agency, home for the aged, synagogue or indeed Jewish Federation.

One of the benchmark papers in our field was Sanford Solender's 1955 work entitled "The Unique Function of the Jewish Community Center."¹ It is with a sense of history that we now view that formulation in light of today's Jewish communal scene. Perhaps what was said in 1955 was not as true as we believed it to be. We were a growing field, new Centers were being built in many cities of the United States, social group work as a method was at the very peak of its influence, and the conflicts of the Janowsky debates had almost disappeared from the meetings of the Jewish Welfare Board and the National Association of Jewish Center workers.

Solender made a most illuminating statement:

What are the Center's distinctive functions and contributions—the factors which differentiate it from other institutions? What are the sources from which its particular attributes are derived? Only as we address ourselves to these questions, identifying the distinguishing features of the Center, can we insure the fullest use of its boundless potential. Only thus can the way be paved for true fruitful collaboration between the Center and other Jewish institutions, each respecting the special contribution of the other. As parts of the complete fabric these characteristics reveal the sources of the Center's uniqueness and vitality.

There followed Solender's delineation of the distinctive *characteristics* of the Jewish

* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Metropolitan City Executive Directors, January 15, 1978.

¹ Jewish Welfare Board, New York, 1955.

community center:

1. Creative use of leisure.
2. Fruitful group experience.
3. Social group work methods.
4. Specialized facilities.
5. A communal character.
6. Mobility and adaptability.
7. Informed volunteer leaders.
8. A distinctive national body.

There followed a definition of the unique *functions* of the Jewish community center:

1. Furthering the personality development of the Jew.
2. Enriching the content of Jewish living in America.
3. Providing a Jewish link for the unaffiliated Jew.
4. Deepening Jewry's sense of community and the quality of its communal living.
5. Training Jewish leadership.
6. Strengthening the civic responsibility of the Jew.

Solender gave recognition to other institutions in Jewish life:

It is true that some of the functions described here are performed in part by other organizations in the community. But the uniqueness of the Jewish community center is in the distinctive combination of the Center's communal character, and other special qualities—its know-how, and the content of its services. These are the things which *distinguish it from all other institutions in Jewish life.*

It is really not important to know whether what was said in 1955 was indeed then true or simply presumed to be true. All of us who were involved in Jewish community centers in 1955

were assured of the superiority of our institution, "our purposes, and our method of work." We were probably wrong in 1955. We took the reality of segmented services, discrete methods and differences of emphasis regarding Jewish life not as degree differences or as stages of development of various institutions on a continuum but rather as "discrete and unique" each from the other.

In retrospect, one can find many institutions who claimed these functions as their own in 1955. I would suggest that our uniqueness at that point was our strength in facilities, our financial resources and in our aggressive lay and professional leadership. We said we were unique and we believed it and many others either believed it or if they had reservations were holding their reservations to themselves.

In 1977 it seems clear to me that our uniqueness does not rest on the functions as defined by Solender. The one area of uniqueness might be considered to be "providing a link for the unaffiliated Jew." Some synagogues see this as their function through adjunctive services such as adult education programs, singles groups, senior adult groups, nursery schools and services to adolescents. Nor should the JCC pride itself on this aspect of its uniqueness. It is after all, a center for the total Jewish community meaning both the affiliated and the unaffiliated. The term unaffiliated is also ambiguous since it does not usually measure Jewish affiliation longitudinally. Certainly most 20 to 30-year-olds do not belong to synagogues or B'nai B'rith groups at that point in their lives. Is the same true in the age cohort of 35 to 45? A survey would probably indicate that it is not true.

The claim to uniqueness in that the JCC is open to the unaffiliated upon careful reflection implies an incorrect judgment on synagogue affiliation. The JCC is open to the unaffiliated in precisely the same way as the synagogue is open to the unaffiliated. If someone wants to go to High Holiday Services and does not want to become a member, he pays what we would call a "nonmember fee." The only thing that differentiates it from non-member fees in Jewish community centers

is the number of dollars involved. The JCC therefore is open to the individual or family precisely to the degree he or she or the family fully identify, that is, become members.

If then uniqueness is neither to be found in our objectives, our method or our structures, in what does it consist? I would suggest that today the JCC is simply another Jewish communal institution existing side-by-side with others and the test is not of its uniqueness but rather how it carries out the same functions (objectives) as those being carried out by others.

It would seem that the day of institutional ideology is gone for good or for ill. A combination of events has made the JCC and other Jewish communal institutions part of a totality of services. This phenomenon is observable in many aspects of Jewish life and I will note only a few.

1. The Jewish community centers have assumed roles and have provided services which were once clearly somebody else's responsibility. Some examples are housing for the elderly, a comprehensive Hebrew language and cultural program, health and day care services for the elderly, medical screening programs and cardiac rehabilitation programs.

2. Other Jewish communal institutions have done precisely the same. Synagogues have developed extensive community center-type programs such as: nursery schools, day camps, resident camps, senior adult programs, outreach and extension programs, *havurot*, etc. Family service agencies have developed extensive senior adult comprehensive multi-service centers, family life education programs, teenage outreach programs and various forms of young adult groups. In these instances both the synagogue and the family service agencies have utilized persons with social work training including those with social group work training. Also in many cases such programs have been open to the total community both the affiliated and the unaffiliated.

3. On a national level the uniqueness of one national agency from another, as for example, the American Jewish Congress and the American Jewish Committee, is by no means

as clear as it once was perceived as being. The awareness of the complex role of national agencies was recognized quite early by several agencies who did not see the McIver report which sought to differentiate functions of agencies as being of long term help to the national agencies. Perhaps a common concern for Israel has required uniformity of action and mandated many similar programs in support of Israel, each supported by a variety of national agencies. The non-Israeli oriented programs of B'nai B'rith, The American Jewish Congress, and the American Jewish Committee, upon analysis, still also seem to merge into one another. All have leadership development programs, all have some educational programs directed at more than their respective boards of directors. The Committee has developed the "university without walls." The Congress has moved into aspects of both advocacy and monitoring of social work programs related to the elderly.

As Federations have assumed greater power, individual agencies have been more and more influenced by what someone has called the "community agenda." This agenda which is in reality Federation agenda is by no means necessarily "community agenda." Indeed it is doubtful that the Federation agenda was carefully wrought as a priority instrument and instead it may be a rather accidental consequence of a variety of external pressures to which the Federation needs to react.

As more institutions in the Jewish community become more committed to service to Jews as a priority and service to these Jews in Jewish terms, any uniqueness to the function of the Center as an institution "concerned with enriching Jewish life" totally disappears. It "disappears" if indeed it ever was our *particularly unique function*. As agencies including the Jewish community centers have become more aware that their particular methodology is neither exclusively effective nor exclusively owned by that institution, social group work has been joined in the Center by a range of other methods which have at least equal status with social group work. Certainly other institutions even in-

cluding Jewish Federations have adopted social group work methodology.

In summary, today's Jewish community seems far different from that of 1955. The difference may only be in degree but our perception of the community today endows it with fundamentally different quality. Nor are Centers any longer unchallenged in claims of uniqueness and they no longer stridently claim uniqueness.

I believe the Jewish community center is merely another agency in a complex of agencies, all committed to the same objectives, each utilizing similar and separate methods, each desiring to serve the total Jewish community, and each recognizing that the person needs to be served in a holistic way.

It would seem that our task and the task of other agencies should be to determine the effectiveness of our service in meeting the common objectives. We also need to identify the connection between the service which we provide and that of other Jewish communal agencies. There may be duplications of service while at the same time there may be serious gaps in service. We require the use of evaluative tools for analysis of who we are and what we are doing. I am not particularly enamored of management by objectives and I have little brief for the ultimate utility of the "unit of service measurement." It is difficult at this stage in the development of such measuring indices to believe that such systems of measurement will give an objective view of a particular agency or help us to see the comparative relationship of one agency with another. Yet the shortcomings of current evaluation systems and methodologies should not be used to avoid our responsibility for both evaluation and accountability.

Our evaluations should be related to a set of objectives and those outlined by Solender with some exceptions will serve us reasonably well. Again, it is in no way assumed that these criteria are specifically applicable only to the Jewish community center. The following are some of the questions which I believe we need to ask of ourselves:

1. Has our orientation remained one which

views the quality of the group experience as primary? This question should be asked of all persons working with various methodologies or in professional disciplines within the Jewish community center. The question is not intended for response only from social group workers.

2. Has our orientation toward individualization and of personality development of the individual been sustained over the years? To what degree do we still devote time, effort and energy to individualizing both in and out of group settings?

3. Are we substantively communally oriented? How much have the membership and budget requirements permitted us to remain communally oriented? Certainly many Centers assume communal roles related to mass events in the community. The question that I would pose is how available are our services to the community other than the "membership community."

4. One of the criteria noted is the mobility and the adaptability of the Jewish community center. To what extent has our investment in major capital facilities permitted us to continue to be adaptable? The phenomenon of building based service can be found even in metropolitan communities. In those cases where agencies have truly been mobile and adaptable, to what degree has this been part of a community plan or some kind of shared response with other agencies rather than the adage "every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost."

How well are we meeting the suggested criterion of "developing informed volunteer leaders?" In one sense, the words "volunteer leader" is no longer to be understood in the 1955 sense of volunteers providing direct service. There is a very commendable effort to recreate the direct service volunteer. Today, in speaking of the volunteer, we usually mean the volunteer committee member and board member. I have no question that our boards are "informed," and in many cases extremely active, devoted advocates for the community center as well as communally responsible men and women. I have some question as to whom

we are bringing into the leadership of the Center. The realities of life compel us to look for leadership among the "powerful." This may have the consequence of immediately strengthening services but of narrowing the base of involvement. The adage "when you want something done give it to a busy man" may be literally true, but it will not give the large group of people who are interested the opportunity to become "busy men and women."

To what extent is the Center truly a link for the unaffiliated Jew, that is, the poor, the sick, the alienated, the intermarried, and the young adult experimenting with Zen or the Jews for Jesus? Can we ignore the rampant prejudice which exists toward these "searching people?" Can we be sanctioned to reach out to these people, recognizing both their Jewishness and their ambivalence?

To what extent are we involved with strengthening the civic responsibility of the Jew? Does this continue to be a needed function for the Center? Certainly the community center does not play a *primary* role in mobilizing public support for Israel or Soviet Jewry. I am cognizant that there are some Centers that are extremely active in this aspect of work. Is the Center a force in its community or separate sub-communities? Are Centers involved in urban transit planning, urban redevelopment, in school busing, and in the myriad concerns of our day to day lives? The Center once had a strong educational role in these areas. It now appears to do nothing but "take public affairs positions." The taking of a position does not convey the reality that the Center is speaking only for that part of the board of directors who by a majority vote made a determination on policy. Not only does this board majority view not necessarily reflect the view of the total board, it is even less likely that it reflects the views of a substantial portion of the membership of the Center. The membership of Jewish community centers is too diverse to permit for any policy statement to serve as a basis of required action by the membership of the Center.

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centers of North America cannot be credited with "unique institutional functions" this does not mean that a Jewish community center cannot play a unique and very significant role in a particular community. But so can a particular family agency, home for the aged, synagogue or indeed Jewish Federation.

A unique function or functions in a Jewish community center may be precisely what is called for in a given community at a given time. The character of the agencies in a particular community and the nature of their interrelationships, the relationships of lay and professional people, and the relative access to resources (their availability to one rather than another institution)—all these factors and more serve to shape function.

These realities would suggest that no institution as a whole has "unique" functions. Rather it would seem that the Jewish community contains a multiplicity of agencies, each attempting to serve that totality which eludes definition—the American Jewish community. The very diversity of that community defies the possibility of uniqueness of function, of method, of program or of particular institutional form.

Wisely or unwisely, we take heed of the reality of the gap between the need and what we are doing. We are sensitive to the limits of any one method or particular form of service and we are disenchanted with specialization. Our efforts have shown us that effectiveness in meeting the needs of people lies in a more comprehensive approach toward meeting such needs.

What does all this mean? It probably means that uniqueness will be stricken from institutional vocabularies and that a comprehensive approach to service is indicated. If this is so it poses the hard question as to whether each institution has the responsibility for providing a total range of services. No doubt this question is best answered locally in determining the dynamics of the particular locale. It may be an expression of individual bias for me to say that the nature of the present Jewish community center in most communities in the United States would make that agency ideally suited to serve as such a multi-service agency. While this may appear to fit the Jewish community center's present relation to other Jewish communal institutions there is not yet sanction for the Center assuming such a role without the most careful consideration and involvement of other Jewish communal institutions. Indeed as I have suggested the very recognition of the diversity of the Jewish community and the recognition that complex individual, group and community needs require a multi-service delivery system would hold that a total community plan for working toward these objectives is what is indicated.

Failing the development of such a communal agency and accepting the continued existence of a multiplicity of agencies each committed to the same objectives, what can we then say of "uniqueness?" I would submit that uniqueness in these circumstances inheres in the dedication in one professional role and as responsible laymen to the Jewish community and how best to serve it.