

Some Issues in the Community Center's Role in Community Development and Organization*

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In the past century, Jewish community centers have developed in many different communities across the world as a result of common felt needs for group cohesion in the Jewish community, but the format and emphasis have varied as a result of differential circumstances in the different Jewish communities. As such, the Center is a multi-faceted institution, in a constant state of evolution, at its best, responsive to the needs of its different constituencies.

In North America, Centers are largely voluntary non-profit communal enterprises earnestly attempting to meet some of the key social needs of the organized Jewish community. They have concentrated on developing a sense of belonging and of identification among their membership/clientele. They earlier served also as instruments for upgrading and mainstreaming newly arrived immigrant Jews into the larger society while assisting them to maintain some tie to the Jewish community presumably more adaptable than the *shtetl* type of organization of Eastern Europe from which many had come.

In Israel, the Centers, most of which are relatively new, are largely governmentally and/or UJA-and JDC-sponsored and geared to the objectives of helping mostly economically disadvantaged residents of development and urban communities to enter into and to become part of the larger society. In many ways, the Israeli Center is akin to the older Western Jewish center-settlement house concerned with helping essentially disadvantaged, relatively newly arrived, groups who are not

part of the mainstream thus reflecting the position of, and the requirements of, the specific Jewish community being served.

In other countries, Centers have developed in response to the needs of the Jewish group as felt and perceived by the residents themselves, the professionals, and the governing or funding bodies.

We learn from reports of the World Federation of Jewish Community Centers¹ that in Latin America, the relatively small number of (primarily middle-class) sports clubs and recreational centers more recently are helping to inject "Jewish content" into their programs.

With the notable exceptions of the United Kingdom and France, the Center concept as such is just beginning to catch on in most of Western Europe, as well as in Teheran.

We therefore find the greatest concentration of Jewish community centers today in North America and in Israel, followed by Great Britain and France. Largely reflective of the status of each of these Jewish communities and their felt needs, the Center has become an instrument for meeting some of the most pressing social needs of those Jewish communities.

In North America, the essentially upwardly mobile Jewish community has reflected the problems of the larger middle-class society, with a weakening of many of the families as units, with a tendency among some adults against forming new families and having children, an alienation of a significant portion of the youth, a growing gap between the generations, neighborhood instability, and

* Presented at the Meeting of the International Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Jerusalem, Israel, August 14, 1978.

¹ Minutes of World Confederation of Jewish Community Centers, Board of Directors Meeting, April 9, 1978.

continual geographical relocation and some attenuation of Jewish belongingness. The Centers which have accepted the responsibility for working with this population have had to adapt their goals and services accordingly. Pre-school-ers, elderly, adults and youth as groups have been served programatically with different degrees of success in different communities with increasing attempts of the Centers to inject meaningful features of Jewish culture and values into these programs.

In the inner cities, where surprisingly large pockets of poor and moderate income Jews have remained, an interesting mix consisting of the elderly, single-parent families, some economically marginal families and individuals, many traditional Jews, and others whose idealism includes belief in the value of stabilizing and strengthening the central city and its older neighborhoods, many problems and potentials coexist as challenges to those Centers which have decided to stay and develop meaningful approaches to the complexities of the situation.

Today, in both situations, Centers are preoccupied with a concern for Jewish survival in an open society and with the introduction of some kind of positive confrontation on the part of at least the younger generations with the meaningfulness and relevance of their Jewish heritage.

Historically the Center has been viewed earlier as an instrument of informal education and socialization—a meeting place for the community. Its community organizational functions have been seen until recently in the past as incidental to the recreational and socialization functions.

Recently, in Israel and in North America, the Center has been increasingly recognized as an instrument of community building and community development reflective of the needs of the community which it serves, as seen through the eyes of its governing bodies, its funding sources, its staff and its membership-client groups. The increasing demands placed on the Center for community development and community organization is a

function of many factors, not the least of which is a growing sophistication of the Center professionals that “we don’t operate in a vacuum and we can contribute to the resolution of at least some of the social problems our client/members face.”

Specific functions are assigned the Center by the groups that affect the Center’s policies and role definitions in different communities at different times. Socialization in its broader definition is concerned with helping individuals to become effective and respected members of a society, capable of leading relatively fulfilling meaningful and productive lives within the context of the family, subgroup, local community and larger society, (if Metropolitan New York is typical). The community organization focus consists of some or all of the following elements:

1. The interfacing with other Jewish service institutions in and out of Federation to create the necessary *service networks* in order to maximize effectiveness and efficiency in service provision. A special aspect of this interfacing includes cooperative planning for an area or region, as the actual or potential accessibility of the population served by each of the Centers is recognized. This has led to coordination, specialization, and the initiation of lacking or scarce services to groups in need.

2. The need for the creation of and, where they exist, interaction with, existing Jewish community councils for the purpose of neighborhood stabilization, improved intergroup relations, concern for a greater degree of Jewish unity, and the obtaining for those Jewish residents of a fair share of public services and resources for which they qualify.

3. The establishment of mechanisms by which community residents can participate more effectively in the *governance* of the Center, especially among newly served and economically disadvantaged groups.

4. The development of *community festivals* and various *special events* which strengthen the sense of Jewish togetherness and viability in neighborhoods where this is not felt, either because of a lack of visibility or of isolation or

divisiveness among the different Jewish groups.

5. “Good old” *social action* in which the Center or Center worker along with membership groups gets involved in some social issue or issues and works for some form of social change in the democratic spirit.

6. Center professionals may also see the necessity for planning and working for overall community problem-solving within specific geographical or specialized interest areas as an appropriate implementation of their role in community betterment in which the Jewish clientele, along with members of other ethnic groups, has a vital stake: such as the improvement of the local public school system, economic development and the need for better police protection, sanitation, health and mental health services, etc.

As reported by the Association of Community Centers of Israel, in Israel, the Center has concentrated on integrating mostly economically disadvantaged newcomers into the social mainstream. As such it plans needed services for all age groups, develops local indigenous leadership, coordinates existing programs for effective service delivery and enhances the total community environment. It has developed many specialized programs to meet felt needs and interests of its service populations. Besides the social and educational programs provided for all ages, it has organized celebrations of national and religious holidays and has taken a leadership role in community projects. A community worker with a specialized role has been added to the staffs of many community centers, to negotiate between the Center and the community groups served or included in the outreach efforts.

From the foregoing, it becomes clear that the overall objectives and many of the methods of the Jewish Community Centers in different communities have much in common. The settings, the emphases, and some of the conditions may vary in minor or even in major ways, thus requiring limited or significant differences in implementation methodologies. Here we need to see both the universal and the

particular elements.

The Center worker who takes on a community organization or community development role is seen as the advocate for individuals and subgroups and as their instrument for influencing Center policy whether through enabling, mediating or advocating or a combination of all of these. The Center is also an institution in itself, a service arm and a microcosm of the larger Jewish community. As the service arm, it may at times become the target of groups seeking some greater power who perceive themselves as insufficiently included in the services provided by the Center and/or insufficiently represented in the governance mechanisms and policy-making bodies of the Center. As a *microcosm* of the larger Jewish community, the Center becomes the first hopefully more flexible and responsive establishment instrument with which the *relatively powerless* client learns how to negotiate to gain a greater modicum of community resources and power. This experience can be extremely valuable in the growth of negotiating capacity by individuals and subgroups who have previously felt quite powerless to assert themselves appropriately as members of an open society.

A major concern for the Jewish community in virtually every setting is its *pluralistic quality*, a product of the different histories of each of the subgroups as well, plus the predilections of the various individuals and groups in the community who find particular aspects of our multifaceted Jewish life to their liking. For some, one or another religious orientation appeals, while for others one or more of the secular modes command their loyalties. The Center, which hopefully should be hospitable to the wide range of these diverse components as well as to the variations in social class, economic and political levels, has both an opportunity and a challenge to create, foster and contribute to the sense of inclusiveness and commonality for all of these groups as intended by the term *Klal Yisrael*.

The Center professional by choice of social issues can hopefully contribute to the sense of

Jewish community togetherness, without the necessity of conjuring up an outside threat of a "common enemy," a real or artificially created encounter with some form of anti-Semitism.

The need for skill and vision here represent indeed a challenge to the Center professional's leadership role. We can invoke a strong sense of unity through the function of *community-problem solving*, and this in turn can lead to a continuing sense of commonality. This can then become institutionalized and structured in the form of representative and inclusive Jewish community governance mechanisms, such as a broad-based community council. In this manner we have the making of a community organization instrument which together with the Center can provide for a sense of unity in the local community. Behind this is the conviction that the Center has a potentially very vital role in giving such a body staff guidance, if this is desired, and that it can help to support an atmosphere of democratic, inclusive and responsible community decision-making.

For the Center to become a sound and effective force for community organization and development, it would be desirable that its board, staff and clientele (membership) be representative of all major segments of the community and responsive to these. The Center professional needs to have a vision of an inclusive, responsive, united, mutually accepting, and responsive community.

The planning committee which put the International Conference session together tried to keep all of this in mind, its members sincerely believing that there were enough common issues even in clarifying the Center's

role in community organization and community development and that we could communicate with and learn from each other. We selected three major issues among many, and yet we felt that even here the three issues were not without some overlapping relationship with each other.

1. *The Center's Role in Outreach to Individual Groups in the Jewish Community.* Here Israel's recent experiences in development towns and urban communities, along with work with the Jewish poor in inner cities in the Diaspora can be very informative. Clarification of role and the development of support systems for the role of the community worker appeared very relevant here.

2. *Provision for Inclusion in the Governance of the Center* of all or most of the significant subgroups (including the socio-economically disadvantaged service population). In the Diaspora this may mean newer arrivals, Orthodox and Chassidic "denominations," and the disadvantaged. In Israel, concern for insuring the participation of and representation of the service populations on some policy-making groups is paramount especially when the official board may consist largely of governmental appointees and leading citizens, perhaps identified with the established power structures.

3. *Innovative Center Programs Which Help to Build a Sense of Community* among the different individuals and subgroups within the Jewish community. The pluralistic nature of Jewish group life may lead to fragmentation and divisiveness and isolation among the different groups and there is a need to experience some sense of commonality.