

# THE ARTS AND THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER Transmitting Jewish Culture

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*The Arts can be a powerful vehicle for strengthening Jewish identity, transmitting Jewish culture, and for creating or re-creating Jewish memories if Arts programming is based on Jewish themes and is interactive. However, most Jewish Community Centers (JCCs) devote only limited resources to the Arts. This article presents a model for transmitting Jewish culture through the Arts that enables JCCs to use their resources most effectively.*

This article explores the ways in which more effective connections can be made in using the Arts as an important vehicle for addressing or strengthening Jewish identity and continuity, a central goal for Jewish Community Centers (JCCs) and the organized Jewish community.

The centrality of this goal is articulated in the vision statement of the Jewish Community Center Association's (JCCA) COMJEE II: Task Force on Reinforcing the Effectiveness of Jewish Education in JCCs:

The vision of the JCC movement is to maximize the use of the programs and services, the position in the community, and the accessibility of the Jewish Community Center to welcome all Jews, to help each Jew move along a continuum of Jewish growth, and to build Jewish memories. The ultimate goal is to create a community of learning Jews who are consciously Jewish; who are respectful of Jewish differences; who are knowledgeable of and committed to Jewish values and practice; who participate in synagogue life and Jewish communal and cultural life; who make Israel a central component in their identities as Jews; and who manifest their Jewishness in lifestyle, life choices, and life commitment, thus creating a Jewish community capable of continuing creative renewal (COMJEE II, 1995, p. 9).

Along with the significant emphasis in Centers over the past decade on expanding Jewish

educational programming, there has been an effort to expand the use of Jewish themes in the Arts. This effort recognizes that the Arts represent one of the most important program areas for addressing these interests and needs of members and the larger Jewish community. It also represents an area of programming that reaches a large cross-section of the community that would not otherwise participate in or be touched by Center activities.

In many Centers, particularly those large enough to employ Arts specialists, these programs take the form of distinctive departments or schools dedicated to this purpose. The YM & YWHA of Mid-Westchester, for example, has a major department of Cultural and Performing Arts that embraces within it Schools of Art, Dance, and Music, as well as a growing theater program, plus a department of Jewish Culture & Education. In each of these program areas, individual or class instruction is provided to hundreds of members from the young child to the adult. In addition, performances are provided to the membership and the larger community throughout the year by professional artists or arts organizations, as well as by faculty or students participating in one of its programs.

Using the Mid-Westchester Y as an example, several significant questions about the Arts and their role as transmitters of Jewish culture arise. How has the Center used its long-standing and very successful programs in the Arts as potentially important transmitters of Jewish culture, i.e., Jewish

history, folklore, or tradition? How have these areas of programming been used to help individuals explore or experience their Jewish selves? How, at a time when JCCs are seeking to make more effective connections with individuals and their Jewish past and present, are they aware of and seeking the best resources available for achieving these objectives? How do Centers communicate the relevance of Judaism to the many who question its relevance in a modern America?

Traditionally, the Arts in Centers are brought to the attention or experience of JCC participants or broader community audiences through classes, scheduled events that provide performances by community or Center-based talent, performances by professional talent arranged through talent agencies or booking organizations, or exhibits provided by private or public organizations. In most cases, the presentation of the Arts is the result of a targeted commitment of funds, often substantial, by the individual Center. During times of adequate resources or at Centers with large enough budgets that have the ability to direct funds for these purposes, perhaps such connections can be made effectively on a regular, if not frequent basis.

For most Centers, however, significant demands on their increasingly limited resources and the shrinking availability of funds for subsidizing programs make such connections difficult, if not impossible. Even if such connections are made, they are frequently not directed to the use of the Arts as a vehicle for transmitting Jewish culture. Therefore, it is important to raise the following questions:

- Is such a focus relevant and appropriate?
- Should arts programming focus more on Jewish themes or on the works of Jewish artists as a primary emphasis?
- Can the Arts reach different Center groups in ways that would increase opportunities for transmitting Jewish culture?
- Do the Arts provide anything more than a momentarily positive impact on those who participate in the activity?

## THE ARTS AND CULTURE

The Arts do not consist simply of only frames and stages. Frames and stages could be empty, yet the Arts and its concepts would still be powerful. The essential function of the Arts is to provide us with a narrative, and in so doing, transmit knowledge and understanding about ourselves, our culture, and our world as well as about other people, cultures and worlds. The Arts are holistic, creating webs of relationships. They attack detachment and indifference. They echo history and are created through it, and they nourish the narratives which sustain a collective ethos. The Arts help us to understand patterns of order and meaning intrinsic to our culture. When such patterns are understood, new realities can be invented and old ones reformed.

As a result, Jewish culture, like all cultures, needs a narrative to feed on; without it the culture will perish. Jewish culture has maintained certain narratives. Perhaps, to some extent that is the current problem. In a large measure too many of us have stopped seeking nourishment from our own stories, while the larger, open society of which we are a part has become a supermarket of competing narratives universally offered and easily accessible to all (Beckerman, personal communication, 1995).

These comments taken from conversations occurring over a period of several weeks suggest a direction for Centers if they are to become more successful in using the Arts to transmit Jewish history, tradition, and values to their members and participants. It is also necessary to consider how these areas of programming can effectively connect with a broadly diversified and knowledgeable Jewish community.

How connections made through exposure to the Arts can influence who we are is illustrated by an observation made by a staff member of the Metropolitan Museum of Art when lecturing a group of students viewing famous works of art. The lecturer tried to engage them in a different kind of experience, i.e., to expose them to a new level of narrative

that would affect what they saw and felt: "We are encouraging the value of discovery, the interest in things beneath the surface, the joy of looking and thinking. It is here that meanings are made, that one's own life illuminates a work of art and a work of art in turn illuminates who we are and what we do. It is an experience that is powerful and personal, and it makes the viewer alive in a way that no amount of information can" (Burnham, 1994, p. 524).

In another example, the Lincoln Center Institute in New York City tries to expose young people to programs that go beyond merely viewing a particular painting, listening to a piece of music, or watching a dance or performance. They try to aid the participants to make new connections by focusing on how and what they experience, as a way to better understand the relationship "between informed attending and actual explorations of choreographics, styles of painting, and musical composition" (Greene, 1994, p. 494)." Such connections are viewed as critical to the learning process.

Engagement with the Arts is not just for those with talent, but rather can be used to help individuals make important connections to who they are, as well as deepening an understanding of the culture of which they are a part. "For while it is true that not all children will become artists...they nonetheless need to find ways of reflecting on, organizing, and speaking to their experiences of being in the world, and they all need to find ways of integrating and of grounding their own organizations within the continuum of the culture in which they live" (Burton, 1994, p. 482).

JCCs, as the central program arm of the Jewish community, are well placed to use the Arts to transmit the narratives needed to provide knowledge and understanding of ourselves, our culture, and the world around us and, as a result, to play an important role in reinforcing Jewish identity.

The Jewish arts attract Jews, even the marginally affiliated. The Jewish arts are immediately accessible in a variety of ways, even for

those Jews who have little background in Judaism or exposure to the arts. The Jewish arts reinforce Jewish identity. The Jewish arts transmit culture. An individual can find meaning in them regardless of his or her degree of affiliation or commitment with the Jewish people or with the Jewish religion (Hirsh, 1994, pp. 133-138).

### TRANSMISSION OF CULTURE

Transmitting Jewish culture in a modern, technologically advanced society is a most difficult task because Jews are bombarded constantly by different messages from the larger culture that are still powerful and often very desirable. Peter Berger (1979, p. 11), in his book chapter, "Modernity as the Universalization of Heresy," notes that "modern consciousness entails a movement from fate to choice." Compared to those living in premodern society, individuals now have "a range of choices which, for most of history, would have been in the realm of mythological fantasy—choices of occupation, of place of residence, of marriage, of the number of one's children, in the manner of passing one's leisure time, in the acquisition of material goods;... choices that deeply touch the inner world...choices of... 'life style,' moral and ideological choices, and last but not least, religious choices" (Berger, 1979, p. 3).

The implications for Centers are that increasing numbers of individuals are no longer connected to their communal organizations as they once were, and individual activity is not governed by clear-cut prescriptions or fate as in a traditional society. As a result, the relationship between individuals and organizations has changed dramatically from an automatic connection to a connection by choice. This reality of choice places a very different kind of burden on Centers, as well as a very different kind of need for individuals as they relate to these Centers, to their families, and to the communities in which they live.

This situation is further complicated by the realities faced by most American Jews in which the "face-to-face community, which, at one time, might have borne the primary

responsibility for enculturation, is an endangered species. A young person growing up in an urban or suburban environment is likely to be exposed to several different cultures, and to become partially enculturated into each" (Aron, 1994, p. 5). Aron further notes, "The process of enculturation into the Jewish community is likely to be, to a greater or lesser extent, fragmented and fraught with ambivalence." Different members of the immediate and extended family are likely to espouse different beliefs, and observe (or not observe) different *mitzvot*. Membership in the Jewish community [and by definition, the JCC] may be a value, but it must compete with many other values, such as achievement in the secular world and participation in a variety of leisure activities. When "information is transmitted in the absence of its once rich cultural context, actions and concepts which were once integral to the culture lose their significance" (Aron, 1994, pp. 7 and 16).

The task then for JCCs is to continue to develop and expand their programs in ways that recognize, understand, and accept these realities. Centers must continue to supplement the efforts made by other institutions in the Jewish community. They need to use their experience and extensive programming skills to continue to respond to individual interests and needs to ensure that individuals choose and use Centers as relevant institutions for exploring their Jewishness, their family dynamics, and their relationship to the larger society.

Centers can achieve these goals by continuing or expanding their use of formal and informal educational strategies in their numerous classes and programs. Because their focus, however, is primarily on the use of informal education as a connecting vehicle, Centers have additional opportunities for engaging their members and participants more actively in a larger diversity of interactively meaningful experiences.

#### **JCCs AND THE ARTS: THE CURRENT EXPERIENCE**

Discussions with colleagues, as well as a

review of more than two dozen Center program guides drawn from metropolitan, large city, and large intermediate city communities throughout North America, provide some insight about the nature and extent of Arts programming in Centers today.

Arts programming is most frequently defined by the age groups it serves, the class offerings, performing art series, Jewish holiday programs, dance and drama programs, film festivals, art exhibits, and shows that may or may not have explicit Jewish themes. However, most Arts programs address universal considerations or themes far more often than they address Jewish considerations or themes. As an example, Center dance programs provide a wide range of instruction from modern dance to tap to ballet. Yet, few programs consciously include Jewish music or stories, where possible, as an important element. Art exhibits may occur with regularity, but do not necessarily seek out Jewish subjects or artists as a primary focus. Music instruction is provided without necessarily considering the works of Jewish composers, and theater performances primarily explore various societal themes without necessarily incorporating or addressing Jewishly relevant themes as a focus of planned productions.

To achieve one of the Centers' major goals, which is to connect Jews to their culture more effectively, Centers will need not only to expand their exploration and use of relevant Jewish cultural resources but also to expand the number and variety of interactive experiences available as well. Doing this will not necessarily mean that Centers will have to expend greater resources at a time when fewer are available. Rather, it will require a more focused selection of materials that more actively explore Jewish issues and themes alone and in contrast with the universal themes so frequently selected.

One Center that has a well-rounded, Jewishly relevant Arts program is the 92nd Street Y in New York City. Although most Centers do not have the resources available to replicate the scope of such a program, it is nevertheless valuable to present it as an ex-

ample, since other Centers can incorporate many of its elements into their own programming.

The 92nd Street Y offers a large number of activities on Jewish issues and themes and regularly provides interactive experiences for its members and audiences: a resident Jewish Repertory Theater; High Holiday services at the Y; and numerous lecture series and arts presentations that use writers, composers, and entertainers to showcase their work through interactive discussion, lecture, and performance. The Y's 1997 Winter/Spring Catalog describes such offerings as storytelling programs—"The Oral Tradition: Jewish Stories for Adults"—in which participants have the opportunity to hear stories taken from the teachers' personal memories as children of survivors as well as telling their own. There are also opportunities for get-togethers to exchange Jewish stories. The Y's Jewish Repertory Theatre is presenting the play, "Goodbye and Good Luck," a musical about an immigrant girl who falls in love with a Second Avenue theater celebrity. Through its Everett Institutes it provides lectures on a broad range of themes from new discoveries on ancient texts and the ways Jews have written and rewritten their prayers to American Jewish history and the authority of the father in Jewish life and literature. Classes are offered on the American Jewish novel, and field trips are scheduled to such places as the Lower East Side and Ellis Island that are designed to give families the opportunity to better understand Jewish immigrant life.

On a different scale, and perhaps more characteristic of the many Centers currently incorporating Jewish themes on both an active and interactive basis in their Arts programming is the Mid-Westchester Y. At the Y, the Arts are used as an important vehicle for incorporating informal Jewish education into regular programming. Singing, dancing, drawing, storytelling, and drama are woven into the fabric of nursery school and summer day camp programs. For example, programs use professional entertainers and staff to regularly engage campers in learning

Jewish songs and stories. Art and photography exhibits are regularly presented on both Jewish and universal themes. Members and the community have the opportunity to view exhibits at their leisure, often meeting with the artists to engage them in a discussion of their work. Through its Heritage Exhibits, the Y presents such shows as the "Spirit of Jerusalem," a photographic exhibit chronicling the vitality of Jerusalem through the eyes of Israeli photographer Shai Ginott; a multimedia show and sale of works by talented Russian refugee artists; or "Passover As I Remember It," an exhibit of pictures of Passover customs and rituals as they were practiced in 1920s Europe. Ceremonial art was also exhibited and interactive discussions held with the artists who created them.

Its Youth Repertory Troupe presents plays that engage not only the audience but also the actors in exploring difficult but relevant themes. Recently, it presented a musical called "Quilt" that portrays stories taken from the AIDS quilt about both Jewish and non-Jewish individuals and families who have been devastated by this disease. Sections of the quilt identifying local individuals who died from this disease were displayed as part of the performance. In addition, the Troupe members had the chance to explore their fears and understanding of AIDS through organized discussions with professionals dealing with AIDS and victims suffering from the disease.

Through its Jewish Culture and Education Department, the Y provides year-round Israeli folk dancing and lessons and family holiday workshops where children and their parents have opportunities to make *tzedakah* boxes, Shabbat candlesticks, *challah*, *shofars*, Passover seder plates, and *matzoh*. As an example, "Not Just Matzos Balls" provides adults with a Passover holiday preparation class where they learn holiday stories, music and customs. For the past several years the Y has offered an annual "Women's Seder" in cooperation with the Westchester Section of the American Jewish Committee to provide women of every religious denomination the

opportunity to come together to participate in a celebration of Passover. Its Jewish Heritage Video Collection offers members access to a large video collection with information cards accompanying the videos that provide background on the Jewish issues raised in the films, discussion questions, and additional resources. As a final example, the Y has created a "Jump into Judaism" program where parents and children explore holidays, symbols, and prayers; create stories; and sing holiday songs.

#### **ELEMENTS OF A MODEL FOR TRANSMITTING JEWISH CULTURE THROUGH THE ARTS**

The question still remains: How can the average Center more effectively transmit Jewish culture through its level of Arts programming? Here are the necessary elements for such a model.

- Centers can develop or build on existing arts programming so that it becomes multidimensional in character and comprehensive in scope.
- Centers must provide a significant number of activities in their repertoire of Arts programming that are based on explicit Jewish themes and address aspects of Jewish history, traditions, and values. Materials and resources also should address themes about the minority Jewish experience in the Diaspora and the connections of these experiences to the larger society and culture of which they are a part.
- Arts activities must actively draw on both the historic and contemporary Jewish experience. By doing so, Centers can expand the experiences of the participants and so enable them to better connect their Jewish past with their Jewish present.
- Arts programs must provide opportunities for individuals to engage their memories, since memories if they are to be sustained need to be re-created. The Arts can provide the continuing context in which memories remain alive and are perpetuated.
- Arts programs should use universal or larger societal themes that have a Jewish foundation as their underpinning. Such programs help audiences or participants understand not only the Jewish ideas or experiences that serve as the foundation of these themes but also provide opportunities for them to actively explore the Jewish connections to these themes.
- Arts programs should help establish differences between universal issues and themes of contemporary society and Jewish issues and themes. Acculturation must help Jews achieve a positive valuation of their difference. Therefore, it is both desirable and appropriate to encourage different cultural inputs within the JCC from all the age groups represented within its membership. Such experiences help each group better value its own culture. Sharing of differences helps individuals maintain their relevance to the larger society. Centers are not and should not become mini-ghettos, dealing with Jewish themes or experiences to the exclusion of all others. Such a fear of exposing members to differences could lead the institution to become or be seen as irrelevant by its members. For example, when celebrating a Jewish holiday or tradition, non-Jews might be asked to present stories from their own experience that would then be used as a basis for discussion.
- Arts programming needs to make more use of strategies that provide for multiple levels of active engagement. It is not enough to simply teach art, music, dance, or drama to an audience in a way that still yields an engaging but passive involvement. Rather, it is important to use some of these offerings as opportunities to provide interactive experiences. For example, the presentation of a play, musical composition, or work of art can be accompanied by a discussion with the playwright, composer, or artist or an appropriately knowledgeable discussion leader.
- Arts programming must use more fully every element of the experience to influ-

ence or affect the audiences Centers seek to reach. Every activity from the marketing of the program, the printing of tickets and the messages printed on them, the intermissions, and how they are used to engage the audience can be seen as additional opportunities for engagement. The off-Broadway play, "Tony and Tina's Wedding," where the audience is actively engaged as part of the wedding party and as a planned part of the production experience, is an example.

- Programming should use both formal and informal educational approaches. However, a greater focus on the experiential elements is essential. Active learning and doing are essential and must be integrated with passive learning opportunities to maximize success.
- Staff training on an ongoing basis is essential if there is an expectation that the staff of Centers will share the dream of becoming active creators and implementers of Arts programs. Resources have to be dedicated to the continuous training of all staff if they are to gain the knowledge and skills necessary for maximizing the connections between Arts and culture.

### CONCLUSION

If Centers merely "present" the Arts to their membership and community, then they are only providing another dimension of passive activity. It is such activity that audiences have come to expect and value, but one that does not necessarily maximize the potential learning opportunity. Centers need to modify these expectations by providing experiences that offer both active and passive opportunities for engagement. They need to help individuals better understand the connections between the two.

In addition, to transmit Jewish culture effectively, Centers need to provide numerous pathways for creating or re-creating Jewish memories since it is these memories that help reinforce our traditions. The trans-

mission of these memories occurs most successfully when accomplished within settings of action or doing and not merely within settings that teach or talk about them. The Arts provide a natural vehicle for combining the presentations of memories with interactive responses.

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