

# NEW APPROACHES IN ACADEMIC TRAINING FOR JEWISH COMMUNITY PROFESSIONALS OUTSIDE THE UNITED STATES

## Assessing the Need

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*A needs assessment did not support the need for an International Master's Program in Jewish Communal Service based at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. However, the key to recruiting and retaining first-rate personnel is raising the overall status of the Jewish communal professional. Training linked to professional accreditation is a critical component in raising the status of Jewish communal service—but, except for North America, is not being offered in a systematic way.*

### THE CHALLENGES FACING JEWISH COMMUNAL SERVICE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The catch phrase for today's Jewish professional and lay leadership is "Jewish continuity." Rabbis, educators, social workers, and community leaders in North America, Europe, Latin America, and Israel have all called our attention to frightening trends in intermarriage and assimilation.

In response to these developments, many of which have been evolving for years, Jewish communities in North America, Europe, Latin America, and Israel are sponsoring cultural, educational, and religious outreach programs for children, youth, and adults, all aimed at reversing, or at least slowing, the erosion of Jewish identity. In some places, there has been a shift in traditional community priorities, reflecting the sense of urgency emanating from community leaders. In a parallel development, the field of Jewish communal service has begun to reevaluate its mission and its ability to implement that mission.

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When an organized Jewish community began to emerge in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century, the first community professionals operated primarily in the realm of social work, helping new immigrants assimilate into American society. Professional training included a basic social work curriculum, augmented with content geared to training professionals specifically for practice in Jewish social service agencies. By the 1970s, it was recognized that community professionals needed to be sufficiently versed in Jewish history, culture, religious traditions, values and beliefs, in addition to having technical, psychological, and sociological skills. Today, the emphasis on Jewish continuity within an increasingly diverse Jewish population demands that the community professional be able to address issues facing the Jewish community—including pluralism, the need for interorganizational relationships and partnerships, the lay-professional relationship—from a basis of Jewish knowledge and competence. Furthermore, over the years, the core professional skills required of Jewish communal professionals have expanded to include familiarity with principles of finance and management (Bubis & Reisman, 1995/96).

In order to meet the demands of a changing field, many Jewish communal service workers recognize the need to raise the level of training and professionalism, not only to

improve the immediate provision of services but also to recruit and retain effective personnel. In many countries, the status of Jewish communal professionals is low, both in terms of pay and of opportunities for long-term advancement. Even in the United States, the role and status of the Jewish professional have been weakened in recent years, mainly due to the increasing tension and complexity of the relationships between professionals and lay leaders (Reisman, 1994).

North America currently has the only model for full-time, accredited professional training programs in Jewish communal service, outside of rabbinic and teacher training programs. Experts there generally agree on the broad outlines for a well-developed academic program in Jewish communal service: the acquisition of specific professional skills and knowledge in the areas of management, policy planning, psychology, and social work; familiarity with Jewish tradition and values, ethical issues, literature and history, and different ethnic customs; and an understanding of the dynamics of contemporary Jewish life in terms of demography, patterns of communal activity, and the role of community institutions and organizations (Bubis, 1994; Bubis & Reisman, 1995/96; Elazar & Bubis, 1993). The field of Jewish communal service in the United States has grown and become more sophisticated; it has also been influenced by general economic trends, with the result that organizations have been required to meet stricter requirements for fiscal responsibility. Consequently, by their second or third jobs following graduation, young Jewish community professionals are being hired for management positions that require them to be computer literate and conversant with advanced accounting and budgeting techniques (Bubis et al., 1991).

In contrast to the situation in the United States, however, and despite a recognized need in many developed Jewish communities in Europe and Latin America to implement innovative programming in all areas of Jewish communal services, there has been no systematic effort to recruit, train, or employ

professional communal workers. Although many individual communities are fairly structured in terms of operating day schools, synagogues, fund-raising organizations (both for Israel and for local needs), and community centers, the overall field of Jewish communal service is neither well organized nor clearly defined with regard to the type of career track it offers the young professional. Yet, the creation of effective, comprehensive, and integrated Jewish communal services in these already developed communities could contribute immeasurably to the enhancement of social cohesion, leadership development, educational programming, and fund-raising campaigns.

The emerging Jewish communities of the former Soviet Union (FSU) and Eastern Europe represent an opportunity that we cannot afford to ignore, not only to organize but to actually create an educational, social, and cultural framework for introducing entire groups to their Jewish heritage. There is an urgent need to funnel welfare services to the Jewish elderly and poor, while many outside organizations are undertaking intensive efforts to facilitate travel and aliyah to Israel. These nascent communities are slowly making the transition from depending on external help to putting together an internal community infrastructure.

The American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) has played a key role in cultivating and training local leadership in the Jewish communities of the FSU. Although many of the most promising young people are emigrating to Israel and elsewhere, the JDC has successfully implemented such programs as the Buncher Leadership Program, which has provided a cadre of 200 lay and professional leaders with such basic skills as supervision, teamwork, fund-raising, and public speaking. Since 1993, some 70 educators have attended the intensive training sessions offered through the Melton Program for Senior Educators from the FSU, a program the JDC operates in conjunction with the Hebrew University Melton Centre for Jewish Education. The William Rosenwald Institute for

Communal and Welfare Workers in St. Petersburg runs a variety of courses that have trained over 5,000 social service administrators and providers, including 150 local directors of Hesed welfare agencies. Although these efforts have enabled Jewish communities in the FSU to set up and implement educational and welfare services based on Jewish values, the field of Jewish communal service there is too young and unstable to expect that a defined career track will emerge within the near future.

**THE MANDEL CENTER FOR JEWISH  
CONTINUITY: ITS INTEREST IN  
ASSESSING THE FIELD OF JEWISH  
COMMUNAL SERVICE**

In 1997, the President of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, with the support of the Mandel family of Cleveland, Ohio, created the Mandel Center for Jewish Continuity, with the aim of defining creative and effective ways to harness the unique and vast resources of the University to enhance Jewish life worldwide.

One of these projects visualized the initiation of an international, academic program for Jewish community professionals in the Diaspora, which would lead to a Master's Degree in Jewish Communal Services from the Hebrew University. The proposed program would be geared toward developing a cadre of communal Jewish experts with expertise and skills in Jewish content, community organization, and administration and management. The Mandel Center's partners in developing the program proposal included the University's Institute for Contemporary Jewry, the Melton Centre for Jewish Education in the Diaspora, the Paul Baerwald School of Social Work, and the Rothberg School for Overseas Students.

The program curriculum as conceptualized would center around three primary subject areas: contemporary Jewry and Judaica, sociological and philosophical foundations of Jewish communal service, and professional skill development (including community work and management). The concept was based on

a two-year model, whereby students would spend some unspecified proportion of time in their country of origin and the remainder in Israel.

To evaluate the feasibility of the proposed graduate program, professional researchers under the auspices of the Mandel Center conducted a worldwide needs assessment. Its general focus was the status of the field of Jewish communal service in various developed countries outside the United States and in the FSU; its objective was to determine whether there was an expressed need for an academic training program of the scope described here, and if so, what was the potential role of the Hebrew University.

The needs assessment used a key informant approach. Mandel Center researchers traveled to major centers of Jewish life in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and the FSU and interviewed other people in Israel. In addition, key informants in other world Jewish communities—the United States, Canada, Australia, Hungary, and South Africa—were interviewed by telephone. Over a four-month period, they interviewed 190 community leaders, senior professionals, young or potential professionals, academics and training professionals, graduates of American Jewish communal service programs, and graduates of other training programs. The researchers were guided by a detailed questionnaire, designed to elicit the respondents' opinions regarding the status and prospects for the Jewish communal service profession, current local situations regarding recruitment and retention of professionals, the market demand for Jewish communal professionals, the parameters of current training programs and the interest in specific new training options, local funding and training resources, and the role the Hebrew University could play in developing and implementing an academic training program for Jewish communal professionals.

The findings from this needs assessment did *not* support the creation of an international Master's program in Jewish Commu-

nal Service at the Hebrew University, as proposed by the Mandel Center. The key informants interviewed did not believe that such a program responded to current situations in the major centers of Jewish life outside North America. However, the data did indicate an increasing concern for professionalism within the field and an almost universal recognition that training linked to professional accreditation is a critical component in the effort to build a profession capable of attracting and retaining talented and qualified personnel, dedicated to serving the needs of the Jewish people. These conclusions have important implications for everyone working in the arena of Jewish communal and social services today.

### **FINDINGS: TRENDS IN THE JEWISH COMMUNAL SERVICE FIELD TODAY**

#### **Factors Affecting the Status of the Field and the Commitment to Training**

The data gathered during the needs assessment demonstrated that the field of Jewish communal service today is as varied as the communities in which Jewish communal service professionals live and work. Nonetheless, most key informants believe that there is an immediate need to increase professionalism in local Jewish community life. Because of a sense of urgency to identify solutions to the problems threatening Jewish continuity and the opportunity in the FSU to organize Jewish community life openly and freely, professionals feel that the time has arrived to work for career growth and accreditation in this field.

Some efforts have been initiated toward this end, including the establishment of local and/or national professional associations, local training initiatives, and alternative efforts on the part of employing organizations to stimulate professional growth for individual staff members. Even in communities where the Jewish population is declining numerically, efforts are being made to improve the quality of the professional field through enhanced training and expanded career opportunities.

Nonetheless, key informants in most communities emphasized that the key to recruiting and retaining first-rate personnel was raising the overall perception and status of the Jewish community professional. The flip side of this issue is the overall reluctance of many organizations to commit themselves to the idea of professional training or accreditation, because the profession of Jewish communal service is so undervalued.

Principal factors cited as directly influencing the status of Jewish communal service included the following:

- *Restrictions in earning capacity:* This factor was determined both by the general level of salaries in the public sector and by the specific characteristics of each Jewish community. In some communities, the culture of voluntary sector activity and philanthropy is so weak that a respectable approach to professionalism is impossible. In other places, the lack of a culture of professionalism is the primary factor leading to low salaries. However, a relatively low salary can be compensated for through other job features, such as security, growth, challenge, diversity, and community respect. Many of the younger key informants, who had been working for several years, felt those features to be lacking. The survey results did indicate that professionals who had secular qualifications in field such as law or business administration often enjoyed more senior positions, indicating that accreditation in the field of Jewish communal service could very well contribute to a greater sense of status.
- *The value of credentials:* The survey conducted by the Mandel Center highlighted the lack of formal accreditation programs in the field of Jewish communal service outside of the United States. With the exception of rabbis and teachers, and graduates of North American programs who were working in other countries, Jewish community professionals were either individuals who were qualified in other fields or who had no relevant academic

qualifications. Although professionals did attend in-service training programs, these were rarely linked to institutions or recognized accreditation formulas; furthermore, the Jewish-specific content was, not surprisingly, minimal. Clearly, the lack of formal accreditation contributes to the self-perception of Jewish community professionals and the perception of the community at large that Jewish communal service is an "amateur" job. In its extreme form, this attitude defines professionals as people who are paid to do what lay leaders do voluntarily.

- *The complexities of the lay-professional relationship:* The relationship between Jewish community professionals and lay leaders varies among communities and sometimes even among different organizations within a community. Some lay leaders and professionals characterized the relationship in adversarial terms. For the most part, however, the situation in North America—where there is now a greater emphasis on the role of the professionals and his or her seniority within the organization—is typical. But even here, respondents believed that the stature of professionals within an organization would increase, and the tendency of volunteer lay leaders to exert their influence unduly would decrease, should the level of professionalism increase. Most informants agreed that this could be achieved through appropriate graduate-level accreditation programs. It should be noted that several lay leaders participating in the survey expressed reluctance to send professionals from their community for advanced training, both because of the economic implications and because of the impact that increased professionalism would have on the lay-professional power relationship.
- *The lack of a clearly defined career path:* Within every Diaspora community outside of North America, the lack of a critical mass of occupational opportunities or a clearly defined career path in Jewish communal service has hampered the recruit-

ment and retention of talented personnel. While some respondents believed that working in the organized Jewish community is a good stepping-stone to advancement to executive positions, many others viewed it as an impediment to finding subsequent jobs in the general marketplace. Unfortunately, there seems to be a prevailing myth that Jewish community professionals are those who have failed elsewhere. Many young people are deterred from entering the field when they witness a senior tier characterized by stagnation and a lack of good role models. In no single national community, with the exception of North America, has there yet been an integrated, multifaceted attempt to create a professional structure that would pull all the strands of Jewish communal life together and present the best possible case for a lifelong, mobile career in the service of the Jewish people.

#### **Expanding the Parameters of What is Included in the Field**

Despite the sense that career opportunities in Jewish communal service are limited, the survey results indicated that the fields of activity within the area of Jewish communal service are actually expanding and diversifying. While there is an overall lack of cross-fertilization among different aspects of community life (i.e., education, welfare, Israel, community relations, and general philanthropy), some planning bodies and national organizations have begun to incorporate sectors that might otherwise have remained fragmented. Several communities outside North America have established professional associations, which could eventually give professionals the feeling that they are engaged in a recognized and well-defined career that encompasses several different types of jobs.

What was made clear through interviews with key respondents working in many related areas is that new opportunities for career advancement are emerging within the field. More and more people are entering the field in one sector with one type of skill, and

then moving across the profession into other fields over the course of a lifelong career. Today, a rabbi who manages a welfare body, a Jewish educator who trains social work staff, or a campaign executive who directs a Jewish educational foundation are all realistic possibilities.

Any type of professional academic training program will have to be flexible enough to respond to this type of career mobility. It may not be possible to devise one programmatic structure that would be appropriate for young professionals whose interests lie in such wide-ranging fields. On the other hand, the diversification of the field and the implications this has for professionalism and recruitment indicate that some type of academic accreditation is needed at this time.

#### **A Concern for More Jewish Content in Jewish Communal Service**

Key informants expressed the concern that Jewish communal service should mean *Jewish* communal service, and not merely communal service for Jews. Although few could quantify or qualify exactly what they meant by phrases such as "a basic grounding in Jewish knowledge," "a strong sense of connection to the Jewish people," or "a capacity to apply Jewish thinking to policy and its implementation," nevertheless there was a clear sense that something vital is missing in their communities.

Respondents pointed to various weaknesses in the Jewish character of the profession; for example, in some locations, few Jews worked in actual service delivery, or there was a lack of in-service training that provided professionals with distinctly Jewish expertise or knowledge. There was a sense among informants that Jewish communal service professionals should be able to bring high-grade Jewish competence into their jobs, be it traditional learning, contemporary knowledge, or special policy expertise. Although most communities did not have the local resources or demand to establish professional programs stressing specifically Jewish expertise, there was general agreement among respondents

that they could benefit from such a program, as long as it could also address the conditions and culture of their local communities.

#### **PARAMETERS OF POTENTIAL TRAINING PROGRAMS AS IDENTIFIED BY PROFESSIONALS IN THE FIELD**

##### **Target Populations for Future Training Programs**

Several target groups for future academic training programs in Jewish communal service were identified by the key informants: young professionals, very senior executives, and lay leaders.

The only group that could feasibly participate in the type of program initially envisioned by the Mandel Center was young professionals in their early-to-mid-twenties, who had the mobility and motivation to spend an extended period of time studying in Israel. These individuals were seen, and saw themselves, as sufficiently committed to warrant a personal or organizational commitment in their future. On the other hand, they felt the need for a boost to carry them through the period of transformation from a first work experience to a lifetime career as a Jewish community professional.

While there seems to be little need for successful, senior executives at the apex of their careers to "take time out" in order to earn a graduate degree, there was interest in establishing some type of framework for advanced training. An ideal program would allow senior professionals to share models of best practice, innovative thinking, and a thoughtful approach to policy issues affecting the leadership of every major world Jewish community. Currently there are only limited opportunities for such high-level networking among professional leaders.

Although the needs assessment described here obviously focused on accreditation and training for professionals, a representative sample of respondents raised the issue of academic training for lay leaders. Many believed that no progress could be made in improving the profession without concomi-

tant initiatives in lay leadership development. An Israeli-based academic program was offered as the most appropriate means of achieving this goal. The survey results also pointed out specific professional development needs within individual communities, which are beyond the scope of this article.

#### **Parameters of Jewish Communal Service Training Programs**

Once respondents were pushed beyond their general support for a professional accreditation program and were asked to identify specific parameters for an acceptable framework, it became very clear that there is probably no one way to answer the needs of Jewish communal service professionals working in different cities and countries around the world.

Some of the key issues raised were the following:

- *Study in Israel:* Because this needs assessment was conducted specifically to determine the feasibility of an academic program based at the Hebrew University, informants were asked to respond to the appropriateness of this format. There was a recognition of the importance of familiarity with Israel to the Jewish communal service professional and a wide range of willingness on the part of both prospective participants and their employers in various communities to allocate time to study in Israel. However, there was no support for long-term residency requirements in Israel. Distance learning technologies could enable students from around the world to maintain an ongoing relationship both with the supervising academic institution, be it the Hebrew University or another, and with each other. The issue of residency in Israel was closely tied to that of Jewish content.
- *Jewish content:* Instruction in Jewish learning was the single most problematic area for most Jewish communities outside North America. Nonetheless, the respondents emphatically favored an approach that would integrate the Jewish and secular components of the program, so that participants would be able to bring Jewish values into management, Jewish knowledge into planning competency, and Jewish awareness into social work and advocacy.
- *Availability of specialist tracks:* Many respondents felt that any credible training program would have to maintain a wide range of specialist tracks, in order to create sufficient marketability for potential administrative, managerial, and campaign executive professionals, as well as strategic planning and more Jewish content-oriented professionals. Individualized training would be supplemented by internships and mentorships. Some respondents mentioned the advantages of offering different types of accreditation.
- *Sensitivity and responsiveness to local community situations:* This was perhaps the overriding concern of many respondents. Although some felt that an international training program would promote mobility within the profession and stress the common elements among Diaspora communities, the prevailing view held that knowledge, expertise, and formal accreditation are culturally tied to local situations, which precludes the creation of a unitary program. These respondents favored an approach in which a strong common core of studies would be supplemented by close consultation between an umbrella organization and each individual community to establish the parameters of that particular program, including language of instruction, balance between Israel and locally based training, specialist tracks, and form of accreditation that would meet local criteria. Furthermore, many respondents noted that there would be a wide variation among countries in terms of the relative prestige accorded to particular forms of accreditation, i.e., MBA or Masters in Social Work versus a Masters in Jewish Communal Service.
- *Cost ramifications for the employing or-*

*ganization:* Many key respondents, be they potential candidates for an accreditation program, high-level professionals, or lay leaders, pointed out the reluctance of most Jewish communal organizations to grant employees an extended period of leave in order to study, due to both financial and personnel restraints. These difficulties exacerbated the respondents' unwillingness to support an exclusively Israel-based program and led to various suggestions whereby participants could alternate or combine periods of work and study.

### IMPLICATIONS

In most communities researched, there is increasing concern for professionalism within all spheres of Jewish communal service. With the exception of North America, this concern is not currently being addressed by systematic, locally based efforts to recruit, train, and retain quality personnel. A serious quantitative and qualitative gap in training was indicated by the results of the Mandel Center's needs assessment.

In many communities, the recruitment of talented young people into communal service professions is a stated objective, but its fulfillment is hampered by several factors, including low pay and status and lack of opportunities for ongoing professional growth and advancement. Training linked to professional accreditation is seen by many as crucial to building a profession that is capable of providing a satisfying lifetime career at all levels. However, in most cases, individuals are entering the field without professional training and relevant accreditation, and with minimal in-service training provided thereafter. Not only do they lack the professional skills to perform well in their jobs and to advance but they often lack the Jewish knowledge required in the field today.

Several communities have reported an expansion and diversification of professional positions available, indicating a window of opportunity for building the Jewish communal service profession through training that

emphasizes up-to-date management and leadership skills within a distinctly Jewish context. According to the research conducted by the Mandel Center for Jewish Continuity, the most effective framework for such training is likely to be an arrangement through which an umbrella organization would provide the Israel-based component of the training while working with each individual community to develop a strategy for personnel development that responds to their unique needs and that can be implemented locally.

Universities are not typically equipped to cater to the unique needs of individual communities. However, The Hebrew University is currently exploring the possibility of developing a Jewish Communal Service training program in one particular community that would award an academic degree in Jewish Studies and a certificate in Jewish Communal Service. This program would be built upon an existing Jewish studies program. The training program is in the very earliest stages of conceptualization, and it would be premature to elaborate at this time.

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