

# Social Work and the Jewish Community

## *Renewing the Partnership*

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*For decades, a master's degree in social work was understood as the essential passport to a career in Jewish communal service. Today, social work is no longer the preferred discipline, and there is a growing preference for training in business, public administration, and nonprofit management. Yet social work values, knowledge, and skills remain highly relevant to many functions within the Jewish communal world, particularly efforts to promote Jewish identity and engagement and to develop the leadership of Jewish nonprofit organizations.*

For decades, a master's degree in social work was understood as the best, and often essential, passport to a successful and influential career in Jewish communal service. Jewish agencies were preferred practicum sites and underwrote graduate social work education for promising young staff. Social work schools partnered with Jewish Studies departments to offer dual masters degrees or other preparatory programs. And Jewish communal workers were prominent in social work education and professional associations, contributing richly to the social work literature.

Today, although many Jewish organizations use social workers, the former dynamic nexus has been broken and perhaps shattered. Social work is no longer seen as the preferred professional discipline and indeed is discounted and even mocked in many quarters. This attitude is particularly prevalent among a new generation of young business entrepreneurs, who, as major donors and board members, are assuming the leadership of the Jewish organizational world. Successful in their own careers, many are looking for replicas of themselves. They have little knowledge or appreciation of the differences between the corporate and the nonprofit world or the particular value of social work skills or professional practice in general. They often offer the simplistic idea that nonprofit organizations need to be run like businesses or, worse, are actually businesses. As one of my colleagues put it, social work has become an epithet.

This article details the reasons for this sea change in attitudes; identifies where social work can still be of great value to Jewish organizations, particularly in addressing the largest challenge facing the American Jewish community—the Jewish identity and engagement of future generations—and suggests what the social work profession needs to do to regain its position of relevance within the field of Jewish communal service.

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It is important to distinguish between social work performed in Jewish settings (e.g., a caseworker or intake worker at a senior living facility), and the question of the applicability of social work knowledge, attitudes, and competencies to the larger field of Jewish communal service. This article focuses primarily on the latter.

Social work's current status in the profession was neatly summarized in a 2010 press release announcing the name change from the Hebrew Union College School of Jewish Communal Service (SJCS) to the HUC School of Jewish Nonprofit Management. Richard Siegel, director of the program, wrote,

*How dramatically the expectations and demands of Jewish professionals have increased. In the early years of SJCS, the most common degree in the field was the Master of Social work... today it is increasingly in Public Administration, Business or Nonprofit Management. Jewish communal professionals are now expected to be both savvy business managers and visionary leaders. On every level of organizational management, they are expected to be successful fundraisers, skilled human resource managers, creative program developers, visionary strategic planners, hard-nosed budget managers, imaginative marketing specialists, inspiring group motivators, master communicators, and innovative problem solvers (Siegel, 2010).*

With the tagline, "Excellence in Professional Leadership," HUC now offers Jewish communal training paired with degree options in business, public administration, and even communication management and public art studies, as well as social work. This follows a similar shift away from social work at other Jewish communal training programs. The cover of the *Chronicle of Philanthropy's* 2010 Continuing Education Guide asked provocatively, "Do You Need an MBA?"

### **THE HISTORIC PARTNERSHIP**

The field of Jewish communal service grew along with the social work profession. Perhaps the basis of the historic partnership was a long-standing affinity between Jews and social work. Although Jews never made up more than 4% of the American population, nearly 30% of incoming group work students in 1960 were Jewish, group work being the predominant service modality in many Jewish organizations (Golden et al., 1972). Around the same time, Arnulf Pins (1964), then associate director of the Council for Social Work Education (CSWE), reported that whereas 80% of the personnel in the larger field of social welfare lacked graduate social work education, 80% of all professional personnel in Jewish social service had received it. Pins (1964) also quoted a 1962 Jewish Welfare Board study finding that 72% of all Jewish Community Center (JCC) executives, subexecutives, and group workers held graduate social work degrees.

The connection between JCCs, the largest employers in the Jewish field, and social work was particularly strong. Jay Sweifach, who has written extensively about the JCC–social work nexus, noted, "At one time a social work degree was the most prevalent academic credential and the one most accepted as providing the skills necessary to carry out the mission of the Jewish Community Center" (Sweifach, 2004, p. 160).

Leading Jewish social workers of that era—Jerry Bubis, David Dubin, Don Feldstein, Sol Greenfield, Norman Linzer, Bernard Reisman, Arnulf Pins, Sanford Solender, and others—were also teachers, prolific writers, and frequent presenters at conferences. A review of the literature cited more than 100 publications related to JCCs and social work (Sweifach, 2002).

### **THE PARTNERSHIP UNRAVELS**

Although social work remains important and prominent in family service agencies and those agencies serving senior adults, overall the extent of the shift is dramatic, particularly in the JCCs. By 2001, only 13% of full-time JCC staff held an MSW, down from an already diminished 23% in 1987 and from the 72% in 1962 (Sweifach, 2004).

This trend is also visible and perhaps most troubling at the executive level of Jewish communal agencies. For example, in St. Louis, most of the older Jewish communal executives have MSWs. However, the new executive at the JCC is a marketing professional and former volunteer, and the director of the Hillel at Washington University is an attorney and also a former volunteer. In recent years, high-profile executive positions at the Los Angeles, San Francisco, Detroit, Atlanta, and Montreal Federations have all been filled by nonsocial workers. In several cities, executive search committees have undertaken concerted efforts to move away from the social worker model.

Professionals entering the field are increasingly coming with degrees in business, public administration, and nonprofit management. A study by Kelner, Rabkin, Saxe, and Sheingold (2005, pp 13) found, “Of organizational workers (e.g., Federation, JCCs, Hillels, JCRCs) who chose to pursue one or more of the master’s degrees typically associated with these jobs, 43% chose an MSW, 43% chose an MBA, 30% chose an MJCS (Masters of Jewish Communal service) or Jewish communal service certificate, and 4% chose an MPA (Master of Public Administration).” Likewise, a study by Steven M. Cohen (2010) surveyed some 2,400 self-selected Jewish communal professionals. Based on the methodology, one could assume that the respondents were generally the most professionally committed, career-track employees in the field. Only 18% held an MSW, whereas 30% held another master’s degree. Just 10% of new workers had an MSW, compared with 25% of those in the field 16 years or more. It appears inevitable that the decline in the number of social workers will accelerate.

### **WHY THE DIVORCE?**

One reason is that the American Jewish community’s changing demographic makeup and integration into the larger society have lessened the importance of concrete social services and thus social workers. Having evolved from a community of immigrants and first-generation Americans struggling to establish themselves, today’s Jews are better educated, healthier, and more affluent than the larger society. In addition, although the rates of social problems such as domestic violence and substance abuse within the Jewish community mirror those of the larger society, Jews are also much more comfortable accessing nonsectarian services, rather than those in distinctly Jewish settings.

This trend has led to a move away from what can be termed the “parallel universe of agencies.” In the past, Jewish doctors could not practice in established

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hospitals, so Jewish hospitals were built. The larger community had a YMCA; the Jews built a JCC. Jewish family agencies, old age homes, and vocational services proliferated. The forces that drove the creation of the Jewish social service network—discrimination and the need for culturally comfortable settings with kosher food and workers who spoke Yiddish—are largely of the past. In response Jewish hospitals merged with secular institutions or closed, and many vocational and family agencies secularized.

A second set of factors unraveling the social work–Jewish communal service partnership is economic. Because compensation is limited, social work is seen as a less attractive career. With more dual-income families, the work force is less mobile. Whereas once professional advancement often meant moving from city to city, today many workers who are ready for the next career step need to find it outside the Jewish community. In addition, reduced mobility, combined with the high cost of recruitment and relocation, has led many agencies to rely on local hiring—often making do with people who possess no specialized training or experience. Certainly, outside of major population centers, Jewish organizations find it very difficult to encourage qualified talent to relocate. Moreover, questions about the value of professional training further reduce the drive to hire trained social workers.

Change has also occurred in social work training and in the social work profession. Beginning in the 1970s, social work education moved away from a focus on informal education and group work specialization that was central to much of Jewish community work; its shift to a more psychosocial treatment orientation and its increasing focus on social reform made it less congruent with settings like the JCC (Reisman, 1972). Group work as a core competency or functional field was squeezed out of curricula by the new trend toward generic models, combining individual, group, and community work (Andrews, 2003). Birnbaum and Pine (1997, p. 269) reported, “A 1991 survey of social work graduate schools revealed that graduate education had practically eliminated group work as a specialized area of study.” However, group work forms the basis of much of what the Jewish community does: youth work, camping, campus work, senior adult recreation, fundraising, and managing committees and boards.

An interesting aspect of the evolution of social work’s role in Jewish communal service is the lively debate that ensued during the 1960s and 1970s about training specifically for careers in Jewish communal service versus the then-preferred training in social work. As Jews assimilated into American society and Jewish distinctiveness began to wane, there was growing concern that the orientation of the social work profession undermined a commitment to Jewish particularism and especially the fostering of Jewish identity. Bernard Reisman (1981–82, p. 100) wrote, “Advocating an ideological stance for a Jewish communal worker is contrary to the classical Social Work view that calls for a ‘value free’ attitude by the professional.” He went on to strongly advocate turning away from social work as the prime training ground for the JCCs. Leonard Fein (1999, p. 111)—one of American Jewry’s most prominent thinkers—suggested that social work “was insistently opposed to concern for Judaism’s soul” and that the social workers who managed Jewish organizations were in the main neither interested nor qualified to confront the crisis of the spirit. Leon Jick (1999, p. 117)

who served as the first director of the Hornstein Program in Jewish Communal Service at Brandeis University, summarized his program's rationale: "An MSW who was Jewishly illiterate was acceptable, but a Jewishly educated and sensitive worker who was viewed as deficient in professional skills was not." With great flair, Armand Lauffer (1969, p 58) advocated the same position in a speech, declaring, "A tradition has ended. A door has been closed, gently but firmly. Let us search for another one to open."

Finally, social work has failed to train and produce adequate numbers of graduates committed to and skilled in nonprofit management. Peter Wuenschel (2006) reported that interest in administration among social work students is negligible, even though 50% of all social workers report being involved in administration. Large numbers of social workers are math and numbers averse; they avoid learning finance and business practices and are uncomfortable with the need for involvement in fundraising. If such social workers become managers but lack the requisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes, they will be inadequate to the tasks of organizational leadership and will then adversely influence the attitudes of executives and board members regarding the value of social work.

### WHERE SOCIAL WORK CAN MAKE A VALUABLE CONTRIBUTION

To determine where social work competencies and Jewish communal needs converge, it is helpful to identify core attributes of social work.

Clearly, one such attribute is the social work profession's foundational value commitment to social justice, which parallels the Jewish imperative of *tzedek*, the pursuit of justice. How different is the social worker's advocacy for the oppressed and disadvantaged from the Jewish drive for *tikkun olam*—repair of the world? Whereas in the 1960s, social work may have been seen as antithetical to Jewish particularistic values, today's young Jews who choose social work may be doing so precisely because of their commitment to social action.

Other core values of social work are aligned with the values Jews prize in our organizations and society (see Table 1). Key social work approaches such as the imperative to "start where the client is," the conscious use of self, a holistic person-in-environment view, and emphasis on strengths and capacity-building are particularly relevant.

In addition, competencies in social group work and community organization play key roles in Jewish settings. It is important to distinguish social group work from related processes such as group therapy or support groups, like those formed among people struggling with illness or loss. The focus here is on groups that are formed primarily in recreational, informal education, and voluntary

**How different is the social worker's advocacy for the oppressed and disadvantaged from the Jewish drive for *tikkun olam*—repair of the world?**

**Table 1.**  
Alignment of Social Work and Jewish Values

#### Social Work Values

A commitment to the dignity of the individual, valuing human diversity and inclusiveness

A commitment to community

Ethical practice

Continuing education

"The Do-Gooder"

#### Jewish Values

*B'tzelem Elohim*

*Kehillah*

*Derech Musar*

*Limmud*

*G'milut hasadim*, acts of loving kindness

action settings, such as youth groups, summer camps, and boards and volunteer committees. These type of groups are oriented toward task achievement or such outcomes as the development of social, interpersonal, or leadership skills; the growth of group and communal identity; or the acquisition of knowledge.

The professional discipline of social work includes extensive training in individual behavior, group, and community dynamics, encompassing theory and a well-formulated values and ethical framework. As a result, the trained social worker working with a group approaches his or her role differently than would a professional with an MBA or MPA. Using knowledge about individual behavior and needs, the social worker focuses on the health of the group and intervenes on the group level. He or she understands the group as a vehicle not only for achieving a task but also for fostering personal growth and development, building social capital, reinforcing collaboration and democratic values, and providing meaning and comfort to its members.

Finally, within social work, there is an increasing commitment to and competence in evidence-based practice, program evaluation, and social entrepreneurship.

Based on these attributes, there are a number of important—and perhaps surprising—areas where social work can play an important role.

### **Continuing Areas of Need**

Although the role of Jewish-based social services will decline and with it the need for Jewishly trained social workers, there are several areas of continued need. The Jewish community is aging faster than the surrounding society. According to the 2000–01 National Jewish Population Study (Rieger, 2004, p. 3), 19% of the Jewish population is over the age of 65, compared with 12% of the larger society. This demographic reality and a well-honed and religiously based commitment to senior adult services mean that a continuum of Jewish-based services for seniors will continue to be an important part of the communal system.

A second area of need, though relatively small, is for culturally competent workers to address the social service needs of the most religiously observant segments of our community.

### **Community Organization and Community Building**

Professionals trained in social work can be particularly effective in efforts to promote unity and lessen intracommunal divisions. Increasing interdenominational and ideological conflict threaten unity and the risk of an historic break in the Jewish people between the more observant and more religiously liberal. Recent studies have also documented a decline in a commitment to collective responsibility and connection to traditional organizations. Sophisticated knowledge of community dynamics accompanied by skills in defining shared interests, building cooperation, and mobilizing action can prove useful.

Declining populations in many communities, reduced organizational affiliation, and increasing assimilation, coupled with the impact of the economy, are driving efforts to achieve collaboration, consolidation, and merger of Jewish organizations. For example, the Jewish Federation of St. Louis is actively promoting the consolidation of several day schools, encouraging similar efforts among congregations, and pursuing collaborative administrative and purchasing

arrangements. These goals are usually approached from a bottom-line financial perspective, and one might assume that businesspeople would be best equipped to lead these efforts. However, overcoming the inherent obstacles to collaboration requires a primary focus on mission enhancement, combined with trust-building, facilitative group processes. These are hallmarks of social work.

### **Education and Advocacy Around Israel, Jewish Security, and Anti-Semitism**

The Iranian threat, international efforts to delegitimize Israel, promotion of boycotts and sanctions against Israel, and the rising frequency of physical attacks on Jews and Jewish institutions all call for expanded activism. Much of this work relies on core social work community organization competencies, such as building grassroots networks; creating coalitions with other ethnic, religious, and special interest groups; providing informal education; and engaging in policy-oriented lobbying. Many of the groups with which the Jewish community must work—church groups, ethnic minorities, labor unions, and academics—are deeply rooted in liberal, social justice perspectives and activism. That makes social workers particularly useful liaisons.

### **Volunteer Management and Leadership Development**

There is an enormous need to recruit, train, and place large numbers of qualified volunteer leaders, especially young adults, in our organizational structure. Although many professional disciplines teach about leadership development, social group work techniques have long been useful in this regard. They promote effective democratic group processes that encourage engagement, indigenous leadership, personal skill development, and empowerment and promote collective responsibility, collaboration, and cooperation. In St. Louis, the Federation recently created an Institute for Jewish Leadership, which is designed to engage, train, and develop both professional and volunteer leaders. Its curriculum includes governance, fiduciary responsibility, fundraising, and strategic planning, as well as Jewish values, ethics, and the sociology and dynamics of the American Jewish community. The Institute's professional leader could easily have been an MBA, rabbi, or academic. However, the program has been built around two experienced social group workers: their ability to involve, inspire, and bring people together is critical, because until that happens, none of the training specifics matter.

Hands-on volunteerism and engagement in social action have been particularly effective in engaging the next generation. In addition, limited financial resources suggest that the Jewish community should be focused on engaging the Baby Boomer generation in direct service volunteerism and "encore careers." The skill sets involved in volunteer management of both the next generation and the Boomers include program planning and evaluation, individual assessment and supervision, education and coaching, guiding organizational change, conflict resolution, and helping align people and organizations. Again, these are all elements of social work. The social work value system and long-standing interest in civic engagement provide an important framework for promoting volunteerism.

## Fundraising

Increasingly Jewish agencies are seeking CEOs who can serve as the chief development officer. According to William Bernstein (1987), fundraising is a social work process. Using a theoretical model developed by William Schwartz, he characterized fundraising's generic tasks as activities that a social worker does with any client system. For example, a basic social work task is to search out the common ground between the client's perception of his own need and the social demands with which he is faced. From a fundraising perspective, we might call this marketing or crafting the ask. Social workers regularly offer data and value concepts that may help the client cope with the issues he or she is facing. This is similar to crafting the case for giving. Similarly, to induce change, social workers lend the client a vision of a better reality.

Social work training is relevant and useful to fundraising in other ways. In the donor-centered, cultivation model adopted by many organizations, the fundraiser first assesses the donor's interests, motivations, aspirations, personal style, and family and business forces—"starting where the donor is." Moreover, because few areas are as intimate as finances, the social worker's profound commitment to confidentiality and professional ethics is critical. Much of our fundraising efforts, especially dinners and other large events, requires the ability to organize and motivate groups of volunteers. Finally, the most basic fundraising skill set is establishing and maintaining a productive, trusting relationship, which is the foundation of social work practice.

## MISSION-BASED MANAGEMENT

Jewish communal institutions are not businesses. Yes, they must use knowledge, skills, and best practices derived from the business and other worlds. Yes, they must be committed to accountability, transparency, efficiency, and data-driven decision making. Yes, it is an ethical imperative to efficiently and effectively use limited financial resources—whether generated through user fees, contributions, or government appropriations. However, the success of nonprofits will not come from running them like businesses.

We are running mission-based institutions. Recently, Charity Navigator (2011) recognized the importance of mission by revising its long-standing and (to me) irresponsible method of rating charities—previously based solely on fundraising and administrative ratios, the level of financial reserves, and more recently accountability and transparency—to include measures of impact or at least the organization's commitment to impact.

In any mission-based organization, success relies on a clear and comprehensive understanding of the mission, the clients and settings served, the problems to be addressed, and the outcomes to be achieved, combined with well-honed skills specific to the particular field. It is then, that knowledge, skills, and best practices from business and other fields can be used to enhance mission attainment.

In education, the medical field, the arts, and research, we are comfortable that their institutions will be run by people who are themselves practitioners, especially if they have also studied in specialized programs such as educational or medical administration or museum management. Yet in the Jewish community, at the senior management level of organizations that rely on social workers,

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increasingly we are looking for hard-headed business types. The risk is that, lacking a deep understanding of the nature of the work the agency does, the clients it serves, and the value that social work brings, such leaders will not provide the policy and managerial support these organizations need to flourish. The risk is underscored by the findings of Dane and Simon (1991), who studied social workers in “host settings,” such as hospitals where social work is not the predominant discipline. They found that there are particular challenges for social workers to continue to demonstrate their worth in those settings.

Moreover, increasingly we have come to view the chief professionals of our institutions not just as managers but as leaders. We look to them for leadership, and that leadership is about defining and articulating a vision and strategy to meet that vision. How is that possible without a deep grounding in the mission?

It may be possible, as some claim, that a good businessperson can run any for-profit business strictly “by the numbers.” However, I have witnessed the failure—sometimes catastrophic—of business-based leadership of Jewish organizations. For example, the St. Louis Jewish community lost its Jewish nursing home to a poorly conceived and poorly executed redevelopment effort, needed because the facility was out of date, inefficient, and struggled to compete with newer for-profit homes for private-pay patients. The redevelopment effort was led by a group of self-confident businesspeople who had limited exposure to the industry, limited involvement in the broader Jewish community, and limited fundraising ability. They hired a former banker, a self-described “numbers-guy and turnaround specialist,” who had no prior experience in senior services. They provided him very generous compensation and a lavish performance incentive to get the project built.

Although some community leaders argued against the plan, this group of businesspeople, armed with generous federal financing and supported by an army of business consultants, undertook to build a high-end, continuum-of-care facility designed to compete with the private market. Its business model posited that, through exceptional amenities, it could attract the lucrative private-pay clients who would subsidize the cost of under-reimbursed Medicaid patients. Thus the board members would have a place where they would be proud to place their own parents, and Medicaid patients would be afforded an exceptional facility.

The facility is stunning. However, six months *before* it opened, new financial projections showed that, based on the planned payer mix, the facility could not generate a positive cash flow. In response, the numbers of Medicaid beds were capped. To appeal to a wider market, the facility changed its name, dropping the word “Jewish.” It tried to downgrade expensive kosher food service. After it opened, because of budget reductions, its reputation for service suffered.

The twists and turns of this story are epic. However, after years of struggle, the facility was taken back by its bond holders and is now being operated as a for-profit. Experts suggested that the \$60 million facility was even more inefficient than its predecessor and was overbuilt by some \$25 million. Ironically, the new owners are now trying to rebrand it as a Jewish facility. The costs associated with the seven-year effort to save it were enormous, requiring the spending down of its endowment and leaving the nonprofit holding corporation with limited dollars and some vacant land, where the old home stood. The Jewish community in St. Louis will never offer long-term care again.

Although numerous factors contributed to this failure, the following stand out:

- A self-selected, closed circle of superconfident volunteer leaders rejected communal input and lost touch with their primary market.
- A group of people with no expertise in senior care made policy and operational decisions that doomed the agency.
- The lack of commitment to its historic mission undercut patient care and communal support.
- The ability to get the project done overwhelmed any sober analysis of whether the project was appropriate for the community.

Ironically, years earlier, many of those leaders had fired the prior director, a trained social worker, who had struggled with the board over exercising leadership. That individual went on to build one of the most successful and large nonprofits in Missouri.

A second example further illustrates the relevance of social work skills, even in a business-related context. In 1993, a group of senior lay leaders—among them some very successful businesspeople—formed a St. Louis chapter of the America Israel Chamber of Commerce. Its function was to promote bilateral trade, primarily for the sake of strengthening Israel's economy. With a \$135,000 budget, funded by Federation allocations, loans, and contributions, the group hired a former business executive—one with minimal Jewish and no Israel experience—and charged him with one essential role: sell Israeli products and services in Missouri or get Israeli companies to locate there. The sole benchmark was to be the dollar value of consummated deals. In fact, the founders were adamant that they did not want this organization to operate in what they referred to as the typical social work manner. This executive, though diligent, struggled to make any headway. The budget was insufficient to support his travel to Israel. He was told not to spend time on organizational development, because that was the work of the volunteers. Unfortunately, those volunteers failed to produce leads or raise sufficient funds. Board meetings had spotty attendance. Suggestions to more aggressively engage state economic development and government officials were rejected. A negative cycle developed, in which shrinking budgets resulted in reduced capability, until finally the group decided to disband in 2005, having achieved few deals of any size.

Believing that this area of bilateral trade still deserved some attention, the Jewish Federation transferred half of its annual grant, \$12,500, to the local Community Relations Council, which agreed to assume some of the Chamber's functions, consistent with its role as an advocate for Israel. What the staff lacked in business savvy or knowledge of the Israeli business world, they made up for in passion for Israel and strong coalition-building, group, and community organization skills. Over a period of years they have maintained visibility for the trade agenda, facilitating at least one business deal. They have arranged an economic delegation to Israel and are working closely with state economic development and life sciences organizations to promote bilateral development in biotech. Although the results are not dramatic, the staff have achieved as much or more as the predecessor agency for a fraction of the cost.

Of course, many business-trained people are effective leaders of mission-based organizations. However, these examples illustrate how business thinking

can be misapplied to the nonprofit sector and show the power of social work skills and strategies even in business-oriented enterprises.

Mirroring trends in the larger nonprofit sector, recent surveys indicate that as many as 75% of the chief professionals at Jewish nonprofits will retire in the next five to ten years. There will be an enormous need for visionary, passionate, skilled, experienced people. This is a great opportunity for social-work-trained executives to help shape the development of the Jewish organizational world. If social workers do not help fill that need, members of other professions will, and the field's ability to play a leadership role will be severely diminished, if not lost.

### **SOCIAL WORK AND JEWISH ENGAGEMENT**

Perhaps the most intriguing, exciting, and promising opportunity for social work turns the original objection to social work on its head. Rather than being antithetical to Jewish particularistic needs, social work can be an ideal discipline to address the Jewish community's most pressing agenda item today—the Jewish identity and engagement of future generations.

Recall that in the 1960s and early 1970s, a number of Jewish professional leaders turned away from social work because they believed that the field's evolution, its nonjudgmental value structure, and students' increasing interests in clinical and social change roles made social work unsympathetic to the communal need to strengthen Jewish identity, increase rates of in-marriage and lifelong affiliation, and take on the critical advocacy agenda of support for Israel and freedom for Soviet Jewry. Separate or dual-degree programs in Jewish communal service were then established. The field sought Jewishly knowledgeable role models who would advocate for Jewish life. The potential conflict between social work and Jewish values was illustrated by this scenario. What should the social worker do when a young person came for counseling about her marrying out of the faith? What these leaders wanted was the Jewish equivalent of "Just say no!"

The Jewish community now knows that the rejection and guilt model was unsuccessful in preventing the profound demographic changes occurring since the 1970s. In its place is a multifaceted, nonjudgmental engagement model in which we try to help the young person find a personally meaningful place in Jewish life. The community offers a wealth of low-barrier entry points, even providing free access to powerful Jewish experiences such as Israel trips. This approach is highly compatible with social work values and methodologies.

This approach also reflects changes in the sociology and identity structure of the young adult population. We now understand Jewish identity as neither fixed nor bipolar—either being turned on or off. The millennial generation is extremely comfortable with having multiple identities and living in multiple communities, many of which are virtual or nongeographic. Identity is a journey that ebbs and flows, twists and turns. Denominational labels such as Reform or Conservative are losing their significance, as Jews borrow from numerous ideas and practices to craft a Jewish identity that is unique. More and more young adults are turning away from mainstream Jewish institutions and embracing Do It Yourself (DIY) Judaism; they are establishing volunteer-led prayer services and seeking empowerment to define and experience Jewish life the way they want, without the authority of rabbis or communal leaders. Thus a young, intermarried Jew, who refuses to join a congregation, can belong to an informal Chavurah

of families that celebrate holidays and Shabbat together. He may send his daughter to a Conservative day school, study online with an Orthodox rabbi in Jerusalem, and keep vegan kosher.

### Three Essential Goals

There are three essential goals of the Jewish identity agenda:

1. Empower people to find meaning, direction, nurturance, and joy in Judaism.
2. Connect individuals to the larger Jewish people in such a way that they see and feel themselves part of the Jewish collective, nurtured by it and responsible to it.
3. Inspire personal behavior reflecting the ideals and values of Judaism: to seek social justice and repair the world.

Against this backdrop, one can ask which professional discipline is most equipped to address the identity challenge.

Certainly, Jewish education is a key element. Intensive day school environments succeed, but the congregational education system is largely seen as a failure. It is questionable whether a teaching model, in which knowledge, identity, and commitment are supposed to flow unidirectionally, will succeed with the emerging generation.

What about business? One of the big problems is that Jewish identity building is generally not a positive cash flow enterprise. Though emphasizing return on investment and efficiency is appropriate, organizational leaders who are overly bottom-line oriented (and rewarded for financial performance) may fail to invest in the approaches necessary to win the hearts and minds of the young Jewish generation. Applying old metrics such as congregational memberships or Federation contributions will lead in the wrong direction.

### Re-Enter Social Work and Its Unique Role and Skill Sets

The social work model of engaging people where they are, empowering them to find the correct path for themselves, is responsive to the needs and changes among young people. For example, the St. Louis Federation has implemented an approach to engagement referred to as the Concierge Model. Skilled, knowledgeable workers are hired by the community, and their sole job is to reach out to specific populations such as young couples with children or returnees from Birthright Israel trips. In coffee shops and living rooms, they go where the people are; learn about their interests, hopes, and needs; and then connect them to the opportunities within the community that are right for them. Not only do they make the referral but they also make the introduction and then follow up to see if the connection was successful. If not, they search for a new opportunity. At its core, this is the classic social work information and referral function.

Moreover, recent evaluation and research on Jewish identity building have identified several types of programs as most effective. In addition to day schools, Jewish summer camps, Israel trips, and Jewish youth groups have been found to have an important impact on Jewish identity. These are programs in which social workers have played dominant roles for years.

Regarding the second Jewish identity goal—connecting individuals to the collective—social work has always focused on the person in society. As William

Schwartz (1961, pp. 154–155) wrote, the role of social work is “to mediate the process through which the individual and his society reach out for each other through a mutual need for self-fulfillment.” Sustaining Jewish peoplehood and balancing individual autonomy with collective responsibility are the types of challenges that social work has always addressed.

As already discussed, social work is naturally aligned with the Jewish passion for social justice. In a new manifesto for the field, Abraham and Windmueller (2000, p. 253) declared, “The Jewish communal enterprise must encompass a dual commitment to the welfare of Jews who are in economic, emotional, and social crisis and to policies and practices of government and the non-profit sector in securing the American dream for all of this nation’s citizens.”

### **HOW SOCIAL WORK CAN REGAIN A LEADERSHIP ROLE**

At the outset, the social work profession must convince itself that it matters. Leaders must be able to explain what social work means to the community and what it means for the profession. What are the unique values and market differentiators that social work brings that make a compelling case for it to play a leadership role?

The value of social work knowledge, value, and skills should be clear as regards numerous roles and settings encompassing informal Jewish education and engagement, community planning, community relations, community building, volunteer management, and fundraising. A first step is to re-educate Jewish volunteer and professional leaders to the nature and breadth of social work and its applicability in diverse settings. It will be necessary to change attitudes and address a stigma that has an impact on social work in general. Increasing the number of social workers occupying direct service and programmatic roles will likely result, over time, in their greater presence in senior and mid-management roles.

However, if social work is to regain a position of leadership within Jewish communal organizations, social workers will need to acquire the training, skills, and necessary attitudes that will enable them to compete with MBAs, MPAs, and the graduates of nonprofit management programs.

Social work degree programs will need to strengthen their curricula in these areas. They should actively recruit management-oriented students, but to do so they will need to compete more effectively with MBA and nonprofit management programs, which are seen as sexier and more useful and as providing better career advancement. They will need to motivate—and perhaps require—social work students to acquire financial, supervisory, and general management skills out of responsibility to the students themselves and the profession as a whole.

Given the limited budgets and weak commitment to in-service training in the nonprofit world, it is unlikely that most workers will receive solid, well-constructed training on the job. Although some professionals will invest in their own continuing education, national and umbrella communal organizations should build robust training programs.

To succeed in the Jewish communal world, today’s workers will also need to be knowledgeable Jews, living a personally meaningful Jewish life and possessing broad familiarity with the contemporary Jewish scene: its sociology, institutions, dynamics, agenda, and Israel. However, the debate continues as to which training

best prepares people for management and leadership positions within Jewish organizations.

Yet the question of which training is better may be a false one. Perhaps truly eclectic knowledge and cross-disciplinary training is preferable. Many of the required skills are generic, and budget management in a for-profit is not much different than in a nonprofit. Yet, there is something deeper and transcendent in embedding these skills within the professional discipline of social work, which includes extensive training in individual behavior, group, and community dynamics; encompassing theory; and a well-formulated values and ethical framework.

In response to this debate, Jay Sweifach (2004, p. 166) wrote, “A heightened sensitivity about diversity, commitment to a person-in-environment theoretical framework, and knowledge of ethnic-sensitive practice are some of the unique perspectives and skills that social workers offer to sectarian institutions.... This knowledge gives social workers an advantage over other workers in understanding the complexities of successfully meeting the needs of all Jews, regardless of background and ...to design and facilitate strategies for working with a Jewishly diverse constituency.”

Similarly, a study comparing the aptitudes of beginning MSW and MBA students for human service management concluded, “MSW students appear to bring with them a value base and personal orientation that provide an advantage over MBA students in managing human service agencies. MSWs are ... better attuned to the mission and scope of services offered by most human service organizations” (Moran et al., 1995, p. 103).

We are running mission-centered organizations. And as any well-trained social worker understands, mission comes first.

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