

The author of this essay, a professional social worker, received *Smikhah* at the Mesifita Tifereth Jerusalem Rabbinical Seminary and a Masters degree from the School of Social Work at New York University.

THE CASE FOR DISTINCTIVELY JEWISH SOCIAL WORK

Since the turn of the century, Jewish social work has been plagued by questions concerning its very scope, nature, and function. Is it supposed to be more than just American social work* carried out under Jewish auspices? Is there a distinctive and unique Jewish component?

In the early decades of the century, Jewish communal service gravitated more and more towards American social work methods, values, and goals. But gradually a need for some uniquely Jewish elements was felt. This trend acquired vigorous momentum from the recommendations of the now famous Janowsky Report that Jewish community centers "devote primary attention to Jewish content . . . [and] be permeated by the spiritual cultural factors which constitute the Jewish way of life."¹

Upon publication of the report in the late forties, Jewish social work committed itself to the introduction of some sort of Jewish component. The establishment of the Jewish Orientation and Training Seminars by the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York in 1955 marked the first step in this direction.

* In our usage, American communal service and social service work will mean social work as practiced in secular settings, excluding all social work practice affiliated with a specific religious orientation. We refer exclusively to the type of social work usually designated "scientific humanistic social work."

The Case for Distinctively Jewish Social Work

In spite of these advances, considerable confusion is still rampant with respect to the nature of the Jewish element in the area of Jewish group and case work. Several social workers, who have struggled with this problem during the last few years, have indicated some of the reasons which may be responsible for our inability to define, let alone put into practice, the Jewish component. Avrunin blames denominational differences and loyalties which have created serious obstacles.² Berger pins the responsibility upon our failure to spell out the precise meaning of the terms "Jewish case work and group work."³

The validity of these arguments can hardly be denied. If we, for example, wish to set up a Jewish educational program, we would soon be stymied by the question, whether it should reflect the tenets of orthodox, conservative, reform, reconstructionist or secular Judaism.

Equally valid is the complaint concerning the lack of proper definitions. What do we really intend by such terms as "Jewish group and case work"? Do we mean that a basic knowledge of Judaism would enable the case worker to do a better therapeutic job with Jewish clients? Or do we mean that there is a unique Jewish case work process — with its own unique approach as to method, diagnosis, and treatment. If so, what is the Jewish attitude towards our standard casework methods and techniques? Does Judaism approve of our emphasis upon non-judgmental counselling, with its accent upon the client's self-awareness and his own responsibility for decision-making?

Though the above-mentioned contentions have a great deal of merit, there is another far more deep-rooted reason for the prevailing confusion regarding the nature of Jewish social work. It is our inability to realize that the very aims, goals, and purposes of Jewish social work are entirely different from those of its American counterpart.

Obviously, social work should be the Jewish community's expression of *Tzedakah*. But, unfortunately, Jewish social work still basically operates with notions adopted from the general environment. Instead of *Tzedakah*, our key concepts are either "charity" (the nineteenth century usage) or governmental and social responsibility (in modern parlance).

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

Though individual social workers, of late, have recognized the basic differences between the Jewish and the American value structure,⁴ Jewish social work, as a whole, has not been reorientated, and proceeds as if Jewish and democratic values were synonymous.

Underlying the basic differences between the American concept of social responsibility and the Jewish notion of *Tzedakah* are two divergent views of justice.

The American concept, as will be shown later, merely stipulates that the individual be compensated for what he deserves. He is entitled to receive what is due to him. It is a concept of justice which basically confers rights upon the individual — not to be hurt or to be infringed upon in any manner. It does not entail any *duty* to come to the assistance of another individual in need. In this scheme, generosity, charity, or beneficence may be dispensed to an individual, only as a favor, never as an act of elementary justice. The Jewish scheme rotates around an entirely different axis. Benevolence is contained in justice. As a matter of sheer justice, we are duty bound to help our fellow man in need. It is this unique definition of justice which accounts in essence for the uniqueness of Jewish social work.

Philosophers disagree on the question whether the definition of justice includes beneficence or generosity. Mill, in a famous passage, alludes to this controversy:

In our survey of the various popular acceptations of justice, the term appeared generally to involve the idea of a personal right . . . It seems to me that this feature in the case — a right in some person correlative to the moral obligation — constitutes the specific difference between *justice and generosity or beneficence* . . . For if a moralist attempts, as some have done, to make out that mankind generally though not any given individual have a right to all the good we can do them, he at once, by that thesis, *includes generosity and beneficence within the category of justice*. He is obliged to say that our utmost exertions are due to our fellow creatures thus assimilating them to a *debt*; . . . Wherever there is a right, the case is one of justice, and not of the virtue of beneficence; and whoever does not place the distinction between justice and morality in general, where we have now placed it, will be found to make no distinction between them at all, but to merge all morality in justice.⁵

The Case for Distinctively Jewish Social Work

It is our contention that the differences between American and Jewish social work values can be traced back to these two competing notions of justice. The prevailing American concept is patterned after Mill's definition, while the Jewish view resembles what Mill rejected as "a justice merging all of morality under the category of justice."

I

Justice in the Dominant American Value System

Many social scientists have attempted to evaluate the uniqueness of American culture. Most agree with Lerner (and Williams) that there is no single key to the secret of American civilization.⁶ Nevertheless Williams, although fully cognizant of the shortcomings of such a study, outlines what he terms "certain major value-configurations in American culture."⁷ Williams' study, according to many authoritative sources, provides a fine theoretical analysis of American values. He enumerates the following major values: achievement and success, activity and work, efficiency and practicability, progress, material comfort, external conformity, nationalism (patriotism, racism and related group superiority themes), science and secular rationality, equality, freedom, moral orientation, humanitarianism, democracy and individual personality.

We shall now examine several of these major values in order to demonstrate that the American concept of justice does not include beneficence.

With respect to freedom, this can be done without difficulty. Seen from a historic perspective, the American quest for freedom is a continuous process of emancipation from all forms of restraint. In the words of Williams:

Always the demand was for freedom from some existing restraint. That the major American freedoms were in this sense negative does not mean, of course, that they were not also positive; they were rights to do, by the same token that they were rights to be protected from restraint. Nevertheless, the historical process left its mark in a culturally standardized way of thought and evaluation — a tendency to *think of rights rather than duties*.⁸

Since freedom primarily implied the protection of individual rights, it was prone to be associated with such notions as the British "laissez-faire" or the American "rugged individualism." If freedom means only protection from restraints, it can easily be equated with the right to use one's property as one sees fit. It then becomes freedom for the entrepreneur, giving him license to practice full economic freedom, compete and exploit with no holds barred! Since we are free to do as we deem fit, society is turned into a neo-Darwinian jungle in which only the "fittest" (i.e., those who excel in intelligence, industry, or even ruthlessness) can survive.

But what does this mean in terms of justice? If Americans would include in justice the notion of generosity, they could not possibly practice freedom in the form of rugged individualism — which is so clearly incompatible with the notion of justice as kindness.

Williams contends, however, "that the dated and localized definition of freedom as practically synonymous with the eighteenth century economic philosophies is no longer accepted by the great majority of people in our society."⁹ We have moved toward a welfare state and hence toward social responsibility. What has changed, however, is not our basic outlook but the circumstances and conditions with which we must cope. Economic depressions as well as world politics have forced us to modify our social welfare laws to such an extent that it appears as if we had changed our values and accepted a broader definition of justice. Yet, in spite of all social security legislation, individuals do not feel indebted to each other.

Let us examine now such basic values as "moral orientation" and "humanitarianism."

"Authoritative observers . . . have agreed on at least one point: Americans tend to see the world in moral terms . . . The quasi-mythical figure, the 'typical American,' thinks in terms of right or wrong, good or bad, ethical or unethical."¹⁰

Humanitarianism, to quote Williams, denotes

emphasis upon any type of disinterested concern and helpfulness, including personal kindness, aid and comfort, spontaneous aid

The Case for Distinctively Jewish Social Work

in mass disasters, as well as the more impersonal patterns of organized philanthropy.

While humanitarianism and moral orientation are deeply ingrained in our mores, we must bear in mind that they, insofar as American attitudes are concerned, are not related at all to justice. Our notion of fair play does not impose any obligation to help our fellow man. Charity is rooted in the sentiment of kindness, not the duty to do justice.

Justice in the Dominant Social Work Value System

At this point, we must ask whether the prevailing social work values, too, have their source in a notion of justice that does not include beneficence. Does the helping profession of social work really value helpfulness? At first sight, the question might seem ridiculous. Yet, upon closer examination we discover that the social work literature does not recognize the basic value of helping as such. Most contemporary authorities seem to subscribe to only the following four basic values, which Friedlander regards as basic to social work:

1. Conviction of the inherent worth, the integrity, and the dignity of the individual.
2. The individual who is in economic, personal, or social need has the right to determine himself what his needs are and how they should be met.
3. The firm belief in equal opportunity for all, limited only by the individual's innate capacities.
4. The conviction that man's individual right to self-respect, dignity, self-determination, and equal opportunities is connected with his social responsibilities toward himself, his family, and his society.¹²

The first three values, obviously, are merely an echo of the American values of individual personality, freedom, equality, etc. The concept of social responsibility, however, seems to mark a departure from the philosophy of individualism that reigned supreme until the turn of the century. Until then, it was generally accepted that the sole function of the State was to serve as a police organ. Blame for economic failure

what is good . . . and what the Lord requires of thee; to do justice . . . and to love kindness and to walk humbly with thy God."¹⁸ The very essence of the Torah, so the Talmud informs us, is the practice of loving-kindness. "The Torah begins and ends with instances of loving-kindness."¹⁹

Charity is included in the definition of justice, since, according to a well-established legal principle, "gifts to the poor are not benevolence but debts."²⁰ As Joseph Lehman succinctly put it, "From the standpoint of the giver, the assistance is a sacred duty; from that of the receiver it is an inalienable right."²¹

Hence, in the distribution of charity, we are to be governed by the *need* of the individual. In the words of R. Jacob Ben Asher,

If he is hungry and needs food he must be fed; if naked and in need of apparel, he must be clothed; if he lacks household utensils, these must be secured for him; and even if he has been used to ride a horse and to have a servant wait on him when he was well-to-do (having become impoverished), a horse and servant must be provided for him; and so on with everyone, according to his needs.²²

From these regulations, Frisch derives two basic principles of Jewish philanthropy: "Charity (*Tzedakah*) whether in gifts or in loans — does not represent a favor that might be withheld but an imperative obligation springing from elementary considerations of justice."²³ "Righteousness finds its most practical expression in the doing of charity, or, conversely, charity is the best medium of the righteous life."²⁴

Implications for Jewish Social Work

We would now like to point out some of the implications of *Tzedakah* for Jewish social work. We do not think it is necessary to belabor the point that as presently constituted, Jewish social work reflects prevailing American social work values. All that matters is that our processes are efficient, practical, and scientific. Instead of dealing with individuals, we are mostly thinking in terms of impersonal statistics. Whenever there arises a conflict between the interests of the individual and those of society at large, the individual is sacrificed.

The Case for Distinctively Jewish Social Work

In our mass-oriented thinking, we emphasize social utility and other pragmatic values. Were we to regard helping our fellow man as a personal duty, helping as such would be a primary value — at times even at the expense of the collective good. Needless to say, considerations of efficiency or utility would have to be subordinated to the primary value of helping. This has important practical implications. A social worker who recognizes that helping a person in need is an obligation (a *debt*) must of necessity be more devoted to his client. He will not merely perform a mechanical job, but he will be personally involved in his “calling.”

The problem of the long waiting lists for services by Jewish social agencies assumes different proportions if viewed from the standpoint of *Tzedakah*. The following talmudic incident sheds a great deal of light on the problem. We are told when Nachum Ish Gam Zu's disciples asked their master, why he, a righteous individual, was afflicted with so much suffering, he replied:

I have brought it all upon myself. Once I was journeying on the road and was making for the house of my father-in-law and I had with me three asses, one laden with food, one with drink and one with all kinds of dainties, when a poor man met me and stopped me on the road and said to me, ‘Master, give me something to eat.’ I replied to him: ‘Wait until I have unloaded something from the ass!’ I had hardly managed to unload something from the ass when the man died (from hunger). I then went and laid myself on him and exclaimed: ‘May my eyes which had no pity upon your eyes become blind, may my hands which had no pity on your hands be cut off, may my legs which had no pity upon your legs be amputated.’ And my mind was not at rest until I added, ‘May my whole body be covered with boils!’²⁵

The lesson is obvious. The talmudic sage could not forgive himself his failure to respond instantaneously to a plea for help. If helping our fellow man is the payment of a debt, we have no right to postpone indefinitely the making of payments. How then can we justify our long waiting lists?

This may appear to be unfair criticism. After all, the waiting lists are due not to indifference but to the lack of facilities,

which, in turn, are caused by a shortage of funds. We must bear in mind, however, that if helping is the primary value of all Jewish social work, the speed with which such help is dispatched must receive priority over some other considerations.

Should a lonely, sick aged person who can barely care for his most elementary physical needs be made to wait for months or years before he can enter an old age home just because more time is needed for recording? Or because five different bureaucratic departments (in each of which there are several levels of bureaucracy) have to examine and approve the case?

The author knows of a client who threatened suicide. But a Jewish family service could not find time for this person because the agency was flooded with calls for help. Would not the waiving of certain bureaucratic requirements have enabled the agency to care for more people?

Let us cite another example. An elderly person with a history of recurring alcoholic episodes was refused admittance into several Jewish old age homes because the social, medical, and psychiatric departments regarded the client as a "risk" for the homes. He might again go off on one of his binges, with detrimental effects upon his roommates in particular and the home in general.

From a utilitarian point of view, this was a proper decision. But is it consistent with Jewish *Tzedakah*? Are not the residents of the home also duty bound to sacrifice some of their comfort for the urgent need of this former alcoholic?

There is still another practice in the geriatric field that seems glaringly inconsistent with the Jewish concept of helping. Many beautiful old age homes refuse, as a matter of principle, to admit any applicant suffering from senility. But can Jewish philanthropy turn its back on these people? Small wonder, then, that many clients in these situations ask social workers: Are you running a philanthropic agency or resort?

It is equally deplorable that Jewish social work does not live up to its claim of meeting "individual needs." Were we to serve each according to his individual needs, we could not avail ourselves of American Public Assistance, which provides equal standards for all public assistance recipients. As undem-

The Case for Distinctively Jewish Social Work

ocratic as it might seem, superficially we must realize that human beings do not have "equal" needs (even for food). What is a luxury for one might be a bare necessity for another and vice versa. We ought to recall the Tur's statement, "and even if he has been used to ride a horse and to have a servant wait on him when he was well to do, (having become impoverished) a horse and servant must be provided for him; everyone according to his needs."²⁶

We might even question whether the entire concept of a helping *profession* conforms to Jewish values. Traditionally, philanthropic leaders of the community were entrusted with this sacred duty. To be sure, Judaism does not object to the order and system inherent in the disciplined profession of social work. After all, a considerable amount of skill, knowledge, method, and technique is needed for the proper dispensation of various forms of assistance. But if professionalizing means turning people into "cases," and if human problems become the *business* of a bureaucratic agency, we lose sight of the very goals of the profession.

A Jewish social worker should possess other qualifications in addition to being a graduate of a recognized school of social work. He must learn, above all, that to help others is a sacred moral obligation, all the more binding on a social worker who is compensated for his services.

If Jewish social work is to live up to its name, it must be patterned after the concept of *Tzedakah*. Only then, will it become a source of pride to our community and a glory to Israel.

NOTES

1. Oscar Janowsky, *The Jewish Welfare Board Survey*, (New York: The Dial Press, 1948), pp. 7-8.

2. William Avrunin, "Jewish Communal Services: Values and Change — Summary of Group Discussions," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, vol. 28, 1960, p. 47.

3. Graenum Berger, "Professional Training for Jewish Communal Services," *Adult Jewish Leadership*, (vol. VI, No. III, Spring, 1960), p. 21.

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

4. Alred J. Kutzik, *Social Work and Jewish Values*, (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1959), p. 6.
5. John Stuart Mill, "On the Connection Between Justice and Utility," in *A Modern Introduction to Ethics*, ed. Milton K. Munitz (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1958), p. 448. Reprinted from *Utilitarianism*, 1861, Chapter V.
6. Max Lerner, *America as a Civilization*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1957), pp. 71-73.
7. Robin M. Williams, Jr., *American Society: A Sociological Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1960), p. 415.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 446.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 448.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 424.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 426.
12. Walter A. Friedlander, ed., *Concepts and Methods of Social Work* (Englewood, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1958), pp. 2-6.
13. Nathan E. Cohen, *Social Work in the American Tradition*, (New York: The Dryden Press, Inc., 1958), p. 312.
14. Herbert Bisno, *The Philosophy of Social Work* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1952), pp. 30, 52.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
16. Code of Ethics of the American Association of Social Workers (Standards for the Professional Practice of Social Work, New York: American Association of Social Workers, 1951).
17. Ephraim Frisch, *An Historical Survey of Jewish Philanthropy*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1924), p. 85.
18. Micah, 6:8.
19. *Sotah* 14a.
20. Maimonides, *Matnas Aniyim*, 1:1-6 and 7-10.
21. Joseph Lehman, "Assistance publique et privee d'apres L'antique Legislation juive," *Revue des Etudes Juives*, vol. XXXV (1897), Appendix, p. 22.
22. *Tur Yoreh Deah*, 250.
23. Frisch, *op. cit.*, p. 78.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
25. *Ta'anit* 21a.
26. *Tur Yoreh Deah*, *loc. cit.*