Bernard Reisman and the Horstein Program at Brandeis University

In 1964 Brandeis University announced the establishment of the Philip W. Louis Graduate Center for Contemporary Jewish Studies. When the program became operational in 1965 and I joined the Brandeis faculty as its director, we announced that one of its purposes was to provide education and training for a broad spectrum of Jewish communal professionals, to create a "Jewish civil service." That same year, a program for training Jewish social workers was inaugurated at the Los Angeles branch of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in conjunction with the School of Social Work of the University of Southern California. Both programs represented independent initiatives in a community still ambivalent about the centrality of its Jewish identity and unconvincing about the need for Jewishly knowledgeable professionals.

The field of Jewish social work— that is, social work conducted in agencies supported by Jewish philanthropic contributions—had a history reaching back to the late nineteenth century. The National Conference of Jewish Social Service had been organized in 1899. From the outset, the aim was to Americanize immigrants and to facilitate the transition from Old World particularism to full participation in contemporary society. Judaism was not on the agenda of the social agencies, and Jewish educational agencies had to fight for inclusion on the margin of the communal agenda.

A shortage of workers in the Jewish field led to the formation of a "Training School for Jewish Social Work" in 1925. In 1932, its name was changed to the Graduate School for Jewish Social Work. Its stated purpose was "to provide facilities for the initial training for Jewish social workers and to provide further training for such workers as are already in the field of Jewish social work" (47FR, 1932-33, p. 199). Some believed that raising Jewish consciousness as well as professional skills should be the mandate of the school. In a 1936 article on "Twenty Five Years of Jewish Education in the United States," Israel Chippin, a Jewish educator, wrote:

The Jewish secular and charitable agencies have experimented the need for workers whose training qualified not only general education and professional technique, but also made definite Jewish information, understanding, and background...The existence of a professional school for Jewish social workers is further evidence of progress made toward Jewish community awareness and responsibility for the quality of Jewish group life in the democracy called the United States of America (47FR, 1936-37).

In contrast to that view of a Jewish educator, Maurice Karpf, director of the school, chose
to emphasize only that the school "has mate-
rially influenced social work education in the
United States" (AJRB, 1936–38, p. 117). Whatever
the assessment, the school did not
survive. The American Jewish Year Book of
1941–42 reports without explanation or com-
ment that the Graduate School for Jewish
Social Work suspended operations after 1939.
The School never succeeded in persuading,
the Jewish community of the importance or
even the value of Jewish social work. While
social work education was essential, Jewish
social work education, whatever that might
mean, was unnecessary in a community fo-
custed on acculturation and integration. "Sec-
tarianism," as Arnold Gurin (1966, p. 38)
observed years later, remained "a persistent
value dilemma."

In the post-World War II period, signif-
cant change in the character of the commu-
nity occurred at an accelerated pace. In 1945,
the National Jewish Welfare Board engaged
Professor Oscar Janowsky of the City College
of New York to survey the program of the
National Jewish Welfare Board and its affili-
atcs. In his introduction to the report, Profes-
sor Salo Baron wrote of "an underlying his-
toric evolution." As a result of the great
European tragedy, he observed,

[the American Jewish Community] has seen
the mantle of world Jewish leadership thrust
upon its shoulders....American Jewry and its
leadership have become keenly aware of that
new responsibility. There are incontestable
signs not only of a cultural awakening, but of a
certain eagerness of the Jewish public to
pioneer in the unexplored realms of a modern
culture which would be both American and
Jewish (Janowsky, 1948, p. xiii).

Once again, the response of the communal
leadership and especially of the Jewish social
work profession did not fulfill the expectation
of the historian educator.

The Janowsky report recommended that
"the program of the Jewish Center should
devote primary attention to Jewish content"
(Janowsky, 1948, p. 7). The report stated

further that "the Jewish purpose and the
Jewish content of its program alone invest the
Jewish Center with dignity and validity and
justify its existence. Only when this primary
purpose has been established are neutral ac-
tivities for the full development of individu-
ality proper" (Janowsky, 1948, p. 7). The
survey was extremely controversial, and its
recommendations were not accepted. "After
year-long study by local agencies and an
appraisal by an outside committee, which
disagreed with the findings of the original
survey, a final statement of principles was
adopted which was a compromise between
differing views as to the importance of gen-
eral and specifically Jewish objectives of Jew-
ish agencies engaged in programs of leisure
time activities" (AJRB, 1948–49, p. 132). Professors
in the Jewish field resisted rec-
ommendations for "Jewish" programming.
And no one asked where professionals who
were more knowledgeable and more commit-
ted to particularistic Jewish concerns might
be found should their services be desired. In
fact, some prominent professionals were sug-
gestively precisely the opposite strategy. In the
late 1950s, Joseph Willen, executive vice
president of the New York federation, pro-
posed a planned departure from "sectarian
policies". "The implication [of his approach]
is that Jewish should continue to contribute
through Jewish channels but should not seek
Jewish content in their philanthropic agen-
cies" (quoted in Urbont).

In the following years, the question of
Jewish content was addressed in numerous
articles and papers reflecting the ongoing
ambivalence of the professional community.
In a 1962 paper, Harold Silver, director of the
Jewish Family and Children's Service of De-
troit, reviewed the perennial debates con-
cerning "What is Jewish about Jewish social
work?" and presented the view that Jewish
agencies were justified only where non-sectar-
ian agencies failed to meet community
needs. The idea that special qualifications
and training were necessary for the Jewish
communal workers was not widely accepted
in the field.
Even Yeshiva University’s Wurzweiler School of Social Work, where Jewish identi-
fication was inarguable, could not escape this ambivalence. The first issue of "The
Jewish Social Work Forum" published in 1963 by the alumni association of the school
was devoted to a symposium on "The Jewish Social Workers’ Primary Commitment
to the Social Work Profession or to the Jewish Community?" In a subsequent issue
(Curtin, director of the 92nd Street YMHA, noted that "a category of our colleagues
in Jewish agencies have commitments to social work without prior commitment to
Jewish communal life." He describes the "feast of imposing the worker’s values upon the
client" and the frequent assumption that dedication to Jewish goals implies disloyalty to
the broader striving for unity of American society or of humanity at large (Curtin, DATE?,
p. 14).

In 1966, Bernard Pastel, director of public information of the National Jewish Welfare
Board, conducted a survey of programs of
offered by Jewish Centers and concluded, "If
one had to appraise the Jewishness of many
Centers only by the content and emphasis of
their published annual reports, membership
brochures, activity folders, and brochures,
he would get the unambiguous feeling that
the Center differs little from a non-sectarian
recreation agency" (p. 283). Such was the
assessment nineteen years after the publica-
tion of the Janowsky report.

The Jewishness of communal agencies was
directly addressed by Arnold Pins, then
Associate Director of the Council on Social
Work Education, in a 1965 paper entitled,
"What Kind of Jewish Communal Workers Do
We Need?" Pins concluded, "Unless Jewish
agencies have a clear Jewish purpose which is
reflected in their programs, they really have no
reason or rationale for continuing to exist as
Jewish agencies and for being supported ex-
cessively by Jewish funds." Pins asserts that
"there is no longer the open challenge to the
need and validity for a Jewish communal
agenda serving Jewish needs as there was
formerly." However, he adds, "It would be a
mistake to assume that silence equals acqui-
sence or to confuse acquiescence with con-
viction." Pins summarized by stating,

We need Jewish communal workers who know
and care about Jewish life and the Jewish
community and who possess profound com-
mitment to provide help and leadership to
Assimilated Jews to preserve and enlighten it... My
most individualists who are at the same time
as Jewish communal workers with adequate
Jewish and professional knowledge, attitude,
and skills and not merely as professional workers
employed by and in a Jewish agency (Stella in
original)... If we really desire Jewish group
survival, then we must begin to improve our
practice and develop needed training and re-
cruitment programs.

Pins had no concrete suggestions, but he did
note positively the establishment of the Yeshiva
University School of Social Work and the
Lown Institute (sic) for Contemporary
Jewish Studies at Brandeis.

Despite Pins’ strong advocacy, support for
sectarianism in the field remained ambiva-
 lent at best. When I arrived at Brandeis in
1966 to inaugurate the Lown Graduate Cen-
ter for Contemporary Jewish Studies, I was
welcomed with virtually unanimous hostility.
The Center aspired to provide academic train-
ing for men and women who would enter the
field of Jewish communal service. The com-
mitment grew out of the conviction that
the Jewish community was sorely in need of
professional leadership who combined intel-
lectual insights with technical skills, who
possessed not only an understanding of
group dynamics and management technique
but who also combined an awareness of the
problems of contemporary Jewish life with a
commitment to Jewish survival.

In one regard, Brandeis University seemed
to be the ideal location for this venture.
Brandeis was a secular institution and there-
fore removed from the ideological and insti-
tutional factionalism of the Jewish commu-
nity. The university, established and sus-
tained with the support of American Jewry,
could be expected to undertake an endeavor that would strengthen the community that had created it. However, Brandeis was a liberal arts college, and therefore within the university there was widespread opposition because of the professional character of the program. The Florence Heller School, which was limited to doctoral studies and to social welfare, was not interested in participating in training practitioners for the Jewish field. The faculty of the Judaic studies department was hostile to a program seen as not sufficiently scholarly. When I joined the faculty of Brandeis in 1965 to direct the Lown Center, my reception from the university community ranged from tepid to cold.

At the same time, professionals in the social work field also withheld their support. Most were unenthusiastic about the program. They feared a watering down of professional standards and pointed out that Brandeis did not have a school of social work or education. For them, the master's degree in social work remained the essential requirement for practice in the field, and the Jewish component remained a low priority. 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.

How could a program be established that was professionally sound and acceptable to all of the relevant constituencies? There was little prospect of finding and recruiting a faculty member with academic credentials acceptable to the university community and with social work experience acceptable to the field of practice. And if one found such a person, would he or she be willing to give up a secure position and risk a career on such an untried, precarious, and controversial program?

Fortunately for the future of the program and of the American Jewish community, Bernard Reisman had arrived on the campus of Brandeis University in 1967 to pursue graduate study at the Florence Heller school. Reisman had been director of two Jewish Community Centers in the Chicago area. He was a successful professional and the father of four young children. He was also an ambitious risk-taker who enjoyed the exciting support of a capable partner—Elaine. At the age of forty, he left his secure and comfortable job, uprooted his family, and came to study at the Heller School on a Meirstein Fellowship awarded by the Jewish Welfare Board. While the fellowship was generous by student standards, it involved a great hardship for a family of six and stipulated that the recipient would return to work for a national Jewish agency.

At the end of the year 1967—the year of the Six-Day War in Israel that institutionalized and energized the American Jewish community and the beginning of the Jewish awakening that Salo Baron had predicted in 1947—Reisman came into my office to inquire about the Lown program and to ask if he could be of assistance. I doubt that he knew what a dangerous question that was and how the answer would change his life. I had brought Joe Lukinsky to the Lown Center to inaugurate the training program for Jewish educators. Shortly afterward, Marshall Sliwa was recruited to oversee a program of research in contemporary Jewish life. Could this "graduate student" be a candidate to launch the program of training for Jewish communal workers? The answer was not long in coming.

Reisman went to work (initially in a part-time capacity) with astonishing skill and enthusiasm. Initiative was his predominant characteristic. He persuaded a variety of local agencies to provide fieldwork placements for our students—not an easy task since the program was unknown and untasted. He organized practical training in and out of the classroom to supplement the academic offerings of the Center. He began at once to create a community of learning and experience in which the interaction of students and faculty became a model for their later professional work and personal growth. An integrated curriculum was developed in which all components were coordinated and professional skills were taught in the context of the Jewish communal experience. A mandatory semi-
narrates the story of a University student who was disqualified from the Jewish Student Union because of his political views. The narrative highlights the challenges faced by Jewish students in contemporary society.
seminar that would bring leading Jewish communal professionals to the campus to share insights and experiences with students. The first leader to be invited was an evocative skeptic, Sanford Solender, whose participation signaled the growing acceptance and maturation of the program. Thereafter all of the most prominent leaders of the community were honored as Milender Fellows. It is safe to say that they not only taught our students but they also learned from them.

The program was continually refined and intensified in response to the changing needs of the Jewish community. Recognition of the importance of their Jewish background and commitment among communal leaders stimulated acceptance of the Horstein graduates. Horstein students without exception found placements in a wide variety of settings—from foundations to Hillel and out to Jewish Community Centers, even to family service agencies—and made their mark on the Jewish community.

Soon the program was attracting students from around the world. Reisman's diligent efforts to establish contacts and his outreach to Jewish communities around the world brought students from Europe, Israel, South America, South Africa, and Australia to the Brandeis campus. The integration of Jewish knowledge and professional skill in one program—which is unique to the Horstein program—and the broad scope of Jewish concerns gave the program a global reach and nourished a sense of the divinity of contemporary Jewish life.

New dimensions were continually developed as Reisman sought to serve the needs of the community, as well as to enrich the experience of students: continuing education seminars for professionals in the field, an annual "distinguished leaders" seminar for lay leaders from around the country, and an annual institute examining key issues on the communal agenda. In 1989, the Nathan Perlmutter Institute for Jewish Advocacy was established. More recently the Max Fisher-Irving Bernstein Institute for Leadership Development in Jewish Philanthropy was inaugurated. An active alumni association maintains a sense of fellowship with the program and provides an ongoing forum for engaging issues in the community.

In addition, the Education program, which had been a component of the original Lown Graduate Center, was revived and expanded. The Horstein program remains flexible and responsive to the needs of its students and of the larger community.

At the turn of the millennium, a transformed Jewish community faces a radically new set of problems and challenges. Jewish continuity has replaced overseas relief and rescue and domestic defense and integration as the primary concern. More than 450 graduates of the Horstein Program and its faculty, and the scores of participants in its seminars and institutes are among the leaders in fashioning responses to the ongoing dilemmas and opportunities.

When I came to Brandeis in 1966 to direct a modest program to train a Jewish "civil service," which had been funded by Philip W. Lown, the prospects for success were precarious. Many individuals over the ensuing decades contributed to the development of the program. But the single key individual responsible for its scope and success has been Bernard Reisman, who recognized its potential and brought it to fruition. The full harvest of his work will be reaped in the years ahead in the work of his students and disciples, in the ongoing contribution of the institute he shaped, and in the model he provided for the field of Jewish communal service.

Without his leadership, the Horstein Program might not have succeeded at all. It certainly would not have achieved the degree of success that it has. As he reaches the age of retirement (from his job but not from his calling), the work of his hands, his mind, and his spirit bring honor to him and benefit to us all.

REFERENCES:

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