

Reflections and Recommendations: A Young Professional's Review of the WCJCS 11th Quadrennial Conference

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For the young Jewish communal professional, conferences provide excellent opportunities to develop the professional sense of self, to network with other professionals in the field to forge meaningful relationships, and to cultivate potential partnerships. I recently attended the World Council of Jewish Communal Service's 11th Quadrennial, in Jerusalem. The title alone of the three day conference *Building a Strong Jewish Future in a Changing World- the Role of the Professional* helped set the tone for the various plenary discussions, cluster forums, and professional track sessions. After attending the conference, my first as a Jewish communal professional, I was inspired to reflect upon some of the important and relevant conclusions that emerged from the Conference and translate them into useful tools that can be helpful for my colleagues and peers - the next generation of Jewish professional leaders. I hope, that by writing from the perspective of a young Jewish communal professional, they will be empowered and inspired, as I was (and continue to be), to infuse the profession with meaning and contribute positively to the future of the Jewish people.

Dr. Steven M. Cohen opened the conference by stating that it seems that there is an overall increase in the number of Jews choosing to join the orthodox camp. In light of this trend, Dr. Cohen suggested that the orthodox and non-orthodox need to strengthen their institutional ties, develop organizational relationships and create partnership opportunities with the ultimate goal of showcasing Judaism as a unified religion. In an age when our Jewish youth are being influenced by a bastion of sources of media and technology, the Jewish people can not afford to show a disjointed front towards the future. Today's Jewish youth, according to Dr. Cohen, view the current Jewish practices and, it would seem, modern Jewish leaders as their role models, as autonomous, boring, bland, coercive, and divisive (aka A, B, C, D according to Dr. Cohen). The teen's outlook on Jewish practices depicts a frighteningly dismal picture for the future of the Jewish people.

In an attempt to refute our youth's view of Jewish practices, Dr. Cohen suggested a solution: applying Peter Berger's theory (1979) regarding the adaptation of religious cultures to modernity. In light of the rapid and constantly evolving nature of the change, we can not attempt to apply only one of Berger's three archetype change models. Approaching the disparity with an isolated set of values is not only counterproductive; it will simply exacerbate and aggravate the problem. Rather, in an attempt to attract and appeal to the greatest common denominator and most diverse modern Jewish youth and in an effort to emerge positively, we, as Jewish leaders need to create a new set of regulations. The new set of rules must be, as Dr. Cohen suggests, an amalgamation of Berger's three basic rules. Clearly, this unique mixture will focus on maintaining the basic Jewish principles which we all hold dear, namely Israel, Tikkun olam, goodwill, social action and awareness, and the Torah. These novel precepts, however, will require a much broader, more inclusive and unique definition and interdisciplinary approach thus ensuring that the fundamental values remain relevant and congruent with our youth's vision and perceptions of Judaism.

Following Dr. Cohen's riveting introductory message, Dr. Dov Maimon, Fellow at The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, agreed with Dr. Cohen's assessment of the current Jewish identity crisis. Dr. Maimon further advanced the case presented by Dr. Cohen by highlighting a uniquely positive situation which most of the Jewish people throughout world are now enjoying economic success. Dr. Maimon acknowledged the obvious threats being posed to the future of the Jewish people. He stated that in a world where the boundaries between Jews and non-Jews are increasingly blurred and the opportunities for interaction between them have been amplified and bolstered by modern technology, the prevailing notions of the Jewish tradition and culture are being challenged by our youth. With the departing of the familiar by an increasingly intelligent and alarmingly aware youth, Dr. Maimon envisioned a critical change in the theology of Judaism. This inevitable renaissance and transformation of the religion should be the impetus, Dr. Maimon suggested, for an all embracing, all encompassing cross denominational strategic plan of Jewish peoplehood. As a nation and for the benefit of our future, we must embrace our current economic resources and focus our resources and attention towards the modification of the current perspective towards Jewish identity.

In many ways, we the leaders of today are being put to the ultimate test by our children. We have been posed with a new set of challenges. The Jewish community as a whole, and more particularly the Jewish communal profession, needs to re-imagine and devise a more appropriate and relevant strategy to engage our youth. The leaders of this generation along with its young professionals need to foster emotional and meaningful associations with the next generation of Jews. Our responsibility as leaders and as role models whether in Israel or in the Diaspora, is to create more universalistic and pluralistic, opportunities for connection. As opposed to the past in which the Jewish community was able to apply a more particularistic approach to our identity and culture, the youth of tomorrow will not tolerate or accept such a set of criteria of inclusion. Dr. Maimon implored us, as a profession, to conceive and lead a more universal and pluralistic approach. We need to diversify the acceptable manners in which Jews, both youth and adults, feel comfortable in connecting to Judaism.

After such inspirational opening statements, a palatable sense of empowerment and desire to impact the future of the Jewish people resonated among the participants. As a means to focus these yearnings towards positive change, the Conference broke up into professional track sessions. I chose to attend the community development session. Arthur Sandman of the Metrowest Federation stated that the common manner in which many Jewish institutions and organizations conduct their activities are reactive to the problems that their respective communities confront be it on a local, national or international level. This is what he called the 'normal' planning process. This model has lied at the center of many programs and fundraising campaigns since the beginning of the Jewish communal profession. For many Jewish communal professionals, this concept is the only method of successful programmatic development. To them, it would seem almost impossible to create the needs for any program or initiative without the necessary data and information that guides them throughout the process of resource development.

In today's constantly changing and mobile world, however, Mr. Sandman suggested that perhaps the wave of the Jewish future might be to shift from the normal reaction planning process to a more 'normative' and ideal process. This process is a much more **proactive** and creative method in which out-of-the-box innovative programs and initiatives lie at its core, yet promotes a set of basic values and tackle large scale issues. There are very few institutions, he continued, that are guided by such proactive visions that aim to create programs and opportunities before the trends are apparent. While this method is generally seen as an ideal, and involves a lot of risk, the methodical and meticulous planning throughout the process, however, is apparent and resonates in the manner in which the programs are implemented.

Mr. Sandman's vision and charge to the participants to either transform the existing organizations or to create new ones that are much more proactive and are willing to take the necessary risks to embark upon forthcoming issues, was an excellent segue for one of the Conference's final professional track meetings. Mr. Alberto Senderey, Regional Director of JDC Europe and Latin America, stated that we have to view Judaism as, using the computer metaphor, software not hardware. Hardware (for example a keyboard or screen) is useless if the accompanying programs and applications are not up to date. As Jewish community professionals, we can not remain static in a transforming society. Jewish tradition, Mr. Senderey declared, has always adapted itself to its surroundings. As we view the next generation of Jewish leaders, who have all been empowered to remain individuals in an ever changing society filled with technological advancements, we need to invest in new 'software.' As with computers, new software uses the old programs as a starting point. In practical terms, Judaism, and more specifically the Jewish communal professional, must draw from its past programmatic successes and failures, as tools to re-imagine the messages that it would like to transmit.

Mr. Senderey suggested a relatively concrete solution: add a line for research & development (R&D) and risk taking to every organizational budget. Authorizing such allocation of funds, will allow the organization to invest in its future, today. While the investments in risk taking and developing innovative programs may breed a sense of uncertainty into new undiscovered areas, the return on the investment is that the organization will remain relevant and thus, have the opportunity to add, in some way, to the pages of the future of Jewish peoplehood.

Mr. Senderey's clear vision for how the Jewish communal service professionals can ensure that Judaism remains a mainstay for the future, was further bolstered by the remarks of Ted Comet, Executive Vice President of the WCJCS and Honorary Associate Executive Vice President of the JDC, during the Quadrennial Closing Plenary. In many ways, Mr. Comet was able to so profoundly encapsulate and summarize the lessons from the various components of the Conference. Mr. Comet, by quoting Rabbi Joseph Soleveitchik, offered the key to the Jewish people's success: retrospection. This term, Mr. Comet explained, is a combination of two polar opposites. We, as Jews are commanded to be prospective for the future and at the same time, are required to be introspective and look inward. Judaism promotes a third way-retrospection - to look back at our past and extrapolate the knowledge and wisdom that can serve as guidelines for our future.

Conclusion

We, as young professionals are charged with implementing the Conference's poignant messages. We must assume this exceptionally exciting, yet almost daunting, responsibility: to formulate a more comprehensive Jewish cultural, social, religious and political perspective that offers creative and innovative initiatives for Jewish engagement. We are all acutely aware that our youth is privy to a plethora of information and is exposed to a myriad of opportunities to participate in non-traditional forms of education and cultural programming. Allowing them to feel a sense of disconnect and irrelevance towards the Jewish people and tradition, would be a grave sin with detrimental ramifications on our part. We must begin **now** to invite our youth to participate in molding the shape of our, and more importantly their, Jewish community, include them in the conception of a new Jewish communal orbit and meet and engage them on **their terms**. Doing so will allow us to investigate and identify **their interests** and create a vision for the future of Judaism. By inducing and infusing our youth with new modes of acceptable allegiance, yet still highlighting the important values and basic precepts of the Jewish people, we will guide our profession towards a future of Judaism that is responsive to modernity, yet remains steadfast to its core.

As young Jewish professionals, we have very big shoes to fill. We have come to the profession in the shadows of the great patriarchs and matriarchs of Jewish communal service. We are the intermediaries between the founders of modern Jewish identity and the generations of tomorrow. We as young leaders, in an attempt to redefine the rules of engagement, are charged with the responsibility to translate and transmit the critical messages that have formed the very underpinnings of today's Jewish reality, and package these messages into material that is both current and relevant in a constantly changing world.

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