

Jewish Family Service Agencies Collectively Perpetuate the Jewish Way

By Lee I. Sherman and Lisa K. Budlow

Strongly rooted in Jewish tradition and values, Jewish family service agencies throughout North America care for the elderly, open doors to the disabled, lift up the unemployed, counsel families and those in mourning, build homes, support education and more. The Association of Jewish Family & Children's Agencies (AJFCA), the North American collective of Jewish family service agencies, provides the platform through which the actions of each of our member agencies in their communities are united in a single, strong Jewish response to human need. In considering the pillars of Judaism that support the work of our agencies and our collective network, we consider also the role of Jewish family service agencies in the larger Jewish community. Jewish family service agencies illustrate a Jewish code for living, providing individuals the opportunity to elevate their lives while linking to one another in a powerful collective—the Jewish people.

Our network links the Jewish community one to another creating a unified Jewish presence in the field of human service.

Since the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E., Jews have lived in diaspora. Without a centralized focal point, people experience their Jewishness through engagement in their local Jewish community and rely on their community to be connected to the larger Jewish network in order to feel a part of the whole. All of Israel is responsible one to the other. All who participate Jewishly feel the safety and support of the entire Jewish community.

AJFCA and its member agencies proudly represent the current chapter of a long and distinguished Jewish history.

The Jewish story is an amazing chronicle of survival through the ages. From our suffering as slaves in Egypt, through years of exile and wandering, surviving pogroms in Russia, the horrors of the Holocaust and centuries of attack, the Jewish people has overcome and reached freedom and prosperity. Without our sense of *amcha*, of Jewish peoplehood, this survival would not have been possible. Today, our network of Jewish family service agencies provides a platform for us to stand up and be counted as Jews who survive and achieve. We were all slaves in Egypt, we were all present to receive the Ten Commandments at Sinai and we are linked together generation to generation, each taking our place in this long and distinguished history.

The family has always formed the center of the Jewish community from Genesis, to the Ten Commandments to daily practice through time.

The Jewish story begins with family. Throughout the book of Genesis we learn of the importance of family, from the commandment to “be fruitful and multiply” to the lessons of our forefathers and mothers and ancient siblings. In Exodus, we receive the tablets containing five commandments on each side. “Honor thy Father and Mother” is placed on the side of obligations to God, scholars tell us, because in the Jewish tradition, if one loses sight of the honor of his parents, he is more likely to lose sight of God. Jewish communities have always acted on this tradition. A crisis in the family is a crisis of the entire community. And the Jewish community addresses such crises through its Jewish family service agencies, which surround and

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support those in need, bringing them close so they may find strength in the community's family of families.

Jewish family and children's services find their basis in the fundamental belief in *b'tzelem elohim*, that all humankind was created in the image of God.

AJFCA member agencies deliver services to those in need with the inherent dignity that arises from the belief, stated in Genesis, that all human beings were created in the image of God. Not only do we see our clients as deserving such dignity and respect, we also value the opportunity that Jewish family service agencies provide to help others in a way that God sees as holy. As such, Jewish family service agencies provide staff, volunteers, donors, and supporters the venue and opportunity to bring ourselves closer to the image of God.

Through Jewish family service agencies, the Jewish community fulfills our obligations of *tzedakah* and *tikkun olam*.

The Jewish concept of *tzedakah*, often translated as charity, but more precisely defined as justice, forms an obligation for the Jewish community to act to create justice in the world. This is not seen as a mere good deed, but instead as a necessity, something that must be done because it is the right thing to do. All Jews are required to work toward *tikkun olam*, perfecting the world, setting it right, whole, and the way it should be. Such a strong obligation that applies to the entire community demands a collective response. Jewish family service agencies serve as the collective response of the Jewish community to work toward justice and a whole and perfect world, and the vehicles through which each of us can meet our obligations.

The Jewish family services movement is founded in *derekh eretz*, the code of mutual respect and responsibility that guides us to put our values into practice.

Derekh eretz, which literally means the way of the land, refers in practice to the way the Jewish community as a whole behaves. We look after one another, are kind to strangers and strive to make the world a better place using the highest principles and most sensible methods. We act with the *chesed*, or mercy, toward the disadvantaged that can only be felt by a community which has spent much of its history as a persecuted minority. We seize the opportunity to perform *g'melut chasadim*, acts of kindness, because that is the Jewish way—the way in which we continue the tradition of generations of Jews before us, not just in the synagogue but through daily actions at home, at work, and in our communities.

The path to *shleimut*, or the Jewish pursuit of wholeness, is prescribed in the Torah through actions that form the basis of the Jewish family service movement.

Jews are commanded by God to be holy. Throughout Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the Torah provides many examples of ways in which we can achieve this. We are not to “reap the harvest” to the edges, but rather to “leave them for the poor and the stranger.” We should not “insult the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind.” We must “rise before the aged and show deference to the old.” These ancient prescriptions lay the foundations for our work for the poor, the disabled, and the elderly. Through this holy work, we seek our path to wholeness. Judaism

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calls on each family and our communal institutions to work together cooperatively to create this path to wholeness for those helped and those helping alike. As our network works, learns, and grows together, we continue to create the path to wholeness for the entire Jewish community.

Uniquely Jewish is the obligation of the community through each and every one of its members to seek out those in need and draw them in close where we know they will gain strength. Judaism teaches us a sense of collective responsibility that calls each of us to participate in our own way—whether through donation, volunteer work, professional practice or random acts of kindness. We sense our unity and mutual responsibility through each recollection of our history, we feel it in the honor and reverence the community places on every individual and family within, and we know it through the values we are taught to dignify each person, to work toward a more perfect world and to act in the Jewish way.

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