

A Matter Of Popularity

San Francisco's Jews have been asked whether they know the work of the Jewish community relations agencies—such as the ADL, the AJCommittee, the AJCongress and the JCRC. The vast majority said they do know—and about two-thirds of those said that the job being done by these agencies is “excellent.” Only about six percent said that the job being done by these agencies is “poor.”

The fact is that most San Francisco Jews are quite satisfied with the job these agencies are doing for them. But one possible interpretation of this fact is that most Jews are more easily satisfied than they should be. It is true that one often gets a sense of there being more dissatisfaction out there than there really is. That's because the outcries and the letters to the editor come from those six percent. After all, few people make an outcry or write a letter unless they are dissatisfied. The six percent in particular, often travel in the same circles, and therefore get a highly distorted picture of the extent of dissatisfaction.



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On the other hand, it may be that the agencies are too concerned with popularity, and are not providing enough leadership. There is always the danger that these agencies can become consumer-oriented rather than goal-oriented. That is, they can come to see themselves as being in the business of keeping their Jewish “customers” happy, rather than doing what is necessary for the security of the Jews in America and abroad.

There was a recent crime-control experiment in a Midwestern city. Police-car coverage was multiplied in certain districts to see whether increased police presence would reduce crime. It did not reduce crime. The people in that city accepted the results, but they still wanted increased police patrol. They wanted to somehow feel better protected even if, in fact, they were not.

In much the same way, some doctors prescribe sugar pills to patients, especially when the patients demand it. The pills have nothing to do with the patient's physical health, but they do provide the patient with some assurance, even if it's false assurance.

Community relations agencies can fall into the same trap. It is sometimes useful to issue a statement, hold a meeting, stage a demonstration. But sometimes these activities may be carried on just to satisfy the customers, and have little to do with remedying some real illness.

Of course, the Jewish agencies must finally serve the Jewish population in whatever way that population wants. But these agencies are also repositories of at least a half century of accumulated experience, research and values in the field of social science known as Jewish community relations. They are, at best, not just butlers for the popular will—but they are also that. In that light, it is not easy to assess the meaning of the fact that these agencies enjoy the overwhelming approval of San Francisco Jews.

One is tempted, at least, to think of the words of the 18th century Hasidic leader, Ber of Mezritch: “What sin have I committed to be afflicted with such widespread popularity?”