

WORLD COUNCIL OF JEWISH  
COMMUNAL SERVICE (WCJCS)  
NINTH ANNUAL QUADRENNIAL  
NOVEMBER 12-16, 1998 IN JERUSALEM  
Strengthening Klal Yisrael: Jewish Peoplehood and  
Jewish Unity  
The Role of the Jewish Communal Professional

TED COMET

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The WCJCS was first convened in 1967 in Jerusalem as an act of global solidarity with Israeli colleagues. It has subsequently met every four years, bringing together Jewish communal professionals from all over the world and from all disciplines to foster networking, interchange, skills enhancement, and a sense of *Klal Yisrael*.

#### SUMMARY OF 1998 QUADRENNIAL

The Quadrennial experience surpassed all expectations in terms of attendance, spirit, and intensity of discussion, despite many prior concerns. Would attendance be affected by the change of date from the traditional June to November or the perceived distancing of the Diaspora from Israel? Would this professional gathering be overshadowed by the Council of Jewish Federations' much larger General Assembly?

The pleasing results: 740 professionals came from 26 countries—some from very distant locales such as Australia and India, and others from places of historic change like the Former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The mood was one of excitement, energy, camaraderie, and engagement, all enhanced by the celebration of Israel's 50th anniversary.

There was a passionate concern for *Klal Yisrael*, a yearning to connect and network with other professionals, to learn about other communities, acquire new ideas, refine skills,

and keep up to date on major issues.

There was recognition of being at an historic turning point. After a decade in which 1,200,000 Jews had been brought to freedom from countries of distress—the Former Soviet Union, Ethiopia, Syria, Bosnia, and Yemen—the task of rescue was no longer a priority, as there are currently no Jews living in countries from which they cannot leave. Anti-Semitism was not seen as a major threat—there was not even enough interest to put together a forum on Advocacy issues, a highlight of previous Quadrennials. The enemy was seen not from without but within: Israel-Diaspora tensions, unity/polarization, religious pluralism, maintaining a sense of community, and eliciting the commitment of the next generation.

The program structure attempted to balance broad communal issues with specific professional concerns and cultural/Shabbat activities. Plenaries focused on Jewish unity and peoplehood, rethinking the Israel-Diaspora contract, and the need for an articulate and inspiring vision for the future. The threat of a military confrontation with Iraq prevented Prime Minister Netanyahu from addressing the Quadrennial, but his readiness to do so was seen as an important recognition of the vital role of professionals; as was the presence of Professor Yaacov Neeman, the Minister of Finance, who also held the portfolio of Relations with the Diaspora.

### **PROFESSIONAL SEMINARS: THE HEART OF THE QUADRENNIAL**

The Professional Seminars were serious, thoughtful, and well attended. Their focus: Community Development and Strategic Planning; Leadership Training; Evaluation in Communal Service; Aging; Holocaust Survivors and Their Families; Working with Boards of Directors; The Jewish Family; Jewish Community Centers; Jewish Education: Integrating Formal and Informal; and Vocational Employment and Training.

Here are just two examples of the issues discussed in these seminars. The one on training for leadership emphasized that postmodern leadership requires a combination of transformational leadership skills and broad Jewish knowledge. Leadership in Jewish education used to require mastery of text, whereas leadership in Jewish communal service drew on a mastery of process. These distinctions should no longer hold. And the casework seminar, entitled "Living With a Different Other," discussed how conflict arises when we try to mold others in our own image and how to learn ways to negotiate and dialogue when differences interfere.

### **NEW ELEMENTS**

Linkage with the GA greatly enriched the Quadrennial experience and provided more professional visibility. For the first time, there was a track on women's issues, which had a great impact on the entire gathering. The session on domestic violence drew such a large audience that it had to be moved to a larger room. There were special sessions for directors of Jewish foundations, a group that, until now, did not perceive itself as Jewish communal workers. Younger professionals had their own meeting, and the lesson is clear: We need to mentor and give more attention to our junior colleagues. The French-speaking delegates held a two-day institute of their own preceding the Quadrennial, which also served to counter a phenomenon about which we are not always sufficiently sensitive—the dominance of English (although

there was simultaneous translation at plenaries and major forums into Hebrew, French, Russian, and Spanish). Finally, the Author's Forum, although technically not a new element, was transformed into a major session.

### **OLD ELEMENTS**

Some of the most valuable learning and connecting took place during informal interchanges between sessions, over snacks in the Delegates Lounge, or over late-night coffee. One difference: At earlier gatherings, delegates exchanged addresses. At the previous Quadrennial, they exchanged fax numbers. This time, it was e-mail addresses.

Yet, the message that was transmitted was clear: a strong affirmation of WCJCS's mission and a desire for a sustained year-round effort for networking, learning and interchange. The growing parochialism and inward turn among professionals and Jewish communities give additional urgency to the WCJCS Mission to enhance professional connections, practice, and interchange and to foster the sense of a worldwide Jewish communal profession. Although in some disciplines international associations exist (e.g., Jewish Community Centers), WCJCS has a special interdisciplinary role to play.

### **PROGRAM PROPOSALS**

To enable WCJCS to fulfill its mission, these steps should be taken.

- The Quadrennial should continue to be the WCJCS centerpiece and the place where initiatives for the next four years are launched.
- Regional conferences should be encouraged in Europe, the Former Soviet Union, Latin America, and the Asian Rim.
- International Affinity Work Groups should develop programs in such areas as women's issues, training programs, and services to the aging.
- Professional consultation and training missions should be undertaken to places of crisis or special needs.

- An annual WCJCS conference should be held in Israel.
- Communications via electronic media should be enhanced.

Within these areas of activities, special efforts should be made to connect to young professionals, promote inter-city cooperation, stimulate research, and catalogue case studies.

### RECOGNITION

As professionals, we understand the complexity of mounting an international conference when the goal is to elicit the participation of many countries in the planning process. The success of the Quadrennial was due to many factors:

- the overall vision and leadership of WCJCS Presidents Stephen D. Solender and Zvi Feine
- the creativity, imagination, and passion of Program Chairman Howard Charish, together with Shaul Lilach of Israel and Marlana Schmool of England
- the boundless energy of the WCJCS Israel office, directed by Dorit Rom, WCJCS Associate Executive Vice President, assisted by Aliza Kobell
- the generosity of CJF's GA team, led by Marty Kraar
- the wonderful cooperation of JCSA: Mark Handelman, Joel Ollander, and Bert Goldberg, who ably handled the Professional Advisory Tracks
- Audrey Weiner, for introducing so effectively the whole area of Women's Issues
- Jack Habib, for managing the sessions on Aging and Evaluation
- Professor Sylvia Barak Fishman, who raised the Author's Forum to new heights
- Armand Laufer, Meryl Weissman, and Michel Montreuil, for Leadership Training
- Alberto Senderey, Michael May, and Ken Lander for Community Development
- Sara Bogen, for Community Centers, and managing the FSU contingent
- John Lemberger, whose track on Holocaust survivors became a major force
- Aviva Leon, for the extraordinary "Living with a Different Other"

And, finally, we owe thanks to all the chairs, presenters, discussants, kibbitzers, and participants who helped make this Quadrennial a truly memorable event.