

# WELCOMING THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

## A Strategic Initiative

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*This article examines one aspect of the research and recommendations of the Jewish Home and Hospital's (JHH) Long-Range Planning Committee. Strategically focused to increase the Jewish presence at JHH, the committee explored the history and guiding Jewish values of the organization. Based on in-depth research, including interviews, site visits, and demographic studies, it recommended four initiatives: increasing Jewish ambiance, enhancing spiritual practice and access to religious observance, developing staff education and learning opportunities and fostering greater community partnerships.*

*"Honor your father and your mother, as  
God has commanded you, that you may  
long endure and that you may fare well in  
the land that God is giving you."*

Deuteronomy 5:16

Jewish communities around the world have long revered this sacred value of honoring one's parents. Whether responding to elders who were poor and had no family, creating senior centers to enhance quality of life, developing meals on wheels programs, supporting geriatric facility construction, assisting elders to themselves become volunteers, or supporting the "sandwich" generation (adults caring for both their aging parents and young children), Jewish communities have been responsive to the needs of elders and their families, usually in the context of larger communal planning (Glicksman, 1991). Many communities have reexamined their responsibility as government funding for many services for elders have become public utilities through Medicare, Medicaid, and housing and HUD Section 202 subsidies.

This article describes the two-year planning effort to create a vision for the Jewish Home and Hospital (JHH) Lifecare System in the year 2020 given this backdrop of com-

munal responsibility and government participation. Although several strategic plans had been developed over the years, there had been no such comprehensive effort in JHH's more than 150-year history.

Today Jewish Home and Hospital Lifecare System serves more than 10,000 individuals every year through its continuum of programs. The system includes a 1,600-bed long-term care (LTC) network on campuses in Manhattan, the Bronx, and Westchester. All campuses provide LTC, subacute care, and rehabilitation care. JHH also runs programs in the community including long-term home health care programs, adult day center programs, NORCs, senior housing, and care management programs. JHH is a UJA-Federation of New York Network Agency and is one of five LTC providers in its system. Within the New York metropolitan area, there are many other Jewish LTC facilities (those that are kosher, sponsored by a religious group, or have historically been connected to the Jewish community in New York) that serve the Jewish community, as well as elders of all backgrounds in need of care.

In 2003, recognizing that planning is "critical to reaching our destination" (Austin, 2002), the chair of the Jewish Home and

Hospital Lifecare System appointed a Long-Range Planning Committee comprising seven members of the board to explore all avenues of future service delivery, research, training, and the related supports. The committee members represented each of the four operating divisions and were diverse in gender, age, and tenure on the board. A 2002 market analysis of JHH provided a starting point for the committee's work, as it reviewed studies, made site visits, and held meetings with experts from a variety of fields. The committee looked at issues affecting LTC, such as technological advancements, staffing shortages, the needs of caregivers, and competition for dollars. An additional area of inquiry was the Jewish nature and forms of expression in senior care systems today. Exploring the Jewish nature of JHH was of great importance to the lay leadership, as this aspect of the system was experiencing dramatic change.

The committee concluded its work by reassessing JHH's values and mission. It delineated six focus areas or pillars: developing strategic interventions to strengthen staff recruitment and retention; increasing opportunities for research, education, and advocacy across the divisions and departments; placing priority on supporting the individual needs of residents, clients, and caregivers; continuing culture change efforts to build resident-centered communities of caring on all campuses; promoting wellness and healthy aging; and welcoming the Jewish community and increasing opportunities for spiritual expression across all of the campuses.

Through this planning process, the committee strategized the long-term vision for JHH, ultimately setting a new mission for the organization.

We are passionate about the quality of aging.  
The services we provide support health, individuality and dignity. Our mission is Lifecare.

Fulfilling this mission—supporting individuality and the quality of aging—clearly required a review and reinvigoration of reli-

gious and spiritual life for the elders, staff, and family caregivers connected to JHH.

This article focuses on the assessment of JHH's Jewish nature and expression within its services and programs. Each step recommended by the Long-Range Planning Committee elaborates on the concept of building and maintaining a "Jewish home" in a nursing home that historically has been institutional and home-like at best. The strategic plan affirms that a Jewish Home can be a home, a place of comfort, or in Yiddish, *Hamish*, homey (Oskin, 2001). It incorporates a number of strategic interventions designed to increase the presence of programs targeting the Jewish population while continuing to maintain a spiritual environment supportive of all.

## HISTORY OF THE JEWISH HOME AND HOSPITAL LIFECARE SYSTEM

In 1848, Hannah Leo and the women of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, now a vibrant Upper Westside Manhattan congregation, planted the seeds of JHH. Recognizing that indigent Jewish women required both comfort and physical assistance, they coordinated home visits to offer help and consolation. By 1870, Hannah Leo had identified the growing needs of those she served and proposed the creation of a more permanent residence through which to provide charitable services to the "aged and infirm" Jews of New York City. The Home for Aged and Infirm Hebrews was established, and Hannah Leo's vision of caring for those in need was realized. This caring act has been replicated around the world within countless Jewish communities (see the Web site of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, [www.jdc.org](http://www.jdc.org)).

From the organization's records, it is clear that from the beginning, the founders of the Home were driven by their religious beliefs to institutionalize the concept of *tzedakah* (justice/charity) through caring for their clients with the same zeal and dedication offered to a loved one. In consonance with this philosophy, the Home's environment was in-

tended to be one that delivered a better quality of life than its residents had known previously. The founders of the Home also sought to provide better lives for those in need, particularly at the end of life, and did so with an unparalleled sense of compassion and respect. As Dr. Simeon Newton Leo, the Home's physician for 53 years, so eloquently wrote in its 1897 Annual Report (p. 19), "If we cherish and venerate our aged parents and relatives, so let us be moved in the spirit of kindness to extend a helping hand to others, allied by the ties of common faith, and the mandates of a higher tribunal—the cause of humanity."

### **ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS ON THE JEWISH HOME'S MISSION**

Since its founding in 1848, JHH has delivered, as part of its core mission, excellent services to older adults. The service aspect of its mission statement has been clear as it has continuously valued quality of care, excellence, research, and training. Likewise, the mission has always reflected and stressed the core Jewish values of honor, social justice, and charity (Oskin, 2001).

However, its Jewish client base has decreased significantly over the past decade because of a variety of factors, including changing demographics and neighborhood transformations. The neighborhoods where the campuses are located have altered over time, as ethnic groups have moved in and out and socioeconomic conditions changed. Jewish patterns of settlement in cities, even in New York, declined after World War II, leading to the weakening of Jewish neighborhoods and to a lower density of settlement (Elazar, 1995). This historical shift is one major factor in the reduction of Jewish clientele at the campuses today. The Jewish population in the New York area, although the largest concentration of Jews in North America today, is growing at a slower rate according to the 2002 UJA-Federation of New York Jewish population study. The number of Jewish persons in Manhattan decreased 21 percent from 308,000 in 1991 to

243,300 in 2002. The Bronx community shrunk 45 percent from 82,000 in 1991 to 45,000 in 2002. Only in Westchester's suburban Jewish community has the population increased, growing 40 percent from 92,000 to 129,000 in 2002.

The Jewish neighborhood migrations, which brought cohorts of Jews from Manhattan to the Bronx, and later to the suburbs of Westchester and other counties in New York State, have changed the neighborhoods in which JHH originally served a majority of Jewish clients. These changes have affected the numbers of Jewish clients served in significant and measurable ways. At the Bronx Campus the overall percentage of Jewish clients has decreased from 64 percent in 1995 to 25 percent in 2004; the Manhattan facility's Jewish clientele has declined from 64 percent in 1995 to 45 percent in 2004; and in Westchester the Jewish resident population has been reduced from 57 percent in 1995 to 34 percent in 2004.

Government support of nursing homes continues to be the largest source of revenue. This funding is provided by state and federal programs, Medicaid, and Medicare and requires that institutions receiving these funds care for clients regardless of religion, race, background, gender, or source of payment. Since the commencement of Medicare and Medicaid in 1965, this reimbursement policy has led to increased diversity within JHH, as more elders living in the neighborhoods near the three nursing homes chose to stay close to home and family when receiving LTC services.

Recognizing that the facilities become a home for the clients, this evolution over time led the Long-Range Planning Committee to ask, What makes a home Jewish? Can an agency assess and measure the Jewish nature of its homes? How can JHH proactively intervene to alter the trend away from the Jewish community and decreasing numbers of Jewish clients, and reorient the system toward its Jewish roots? How can JHH accomplish that reorientation while ensuring

that the three campuses remain centers of vibrant religious life for people of all faiths?

### THE STUDY

From January 2003 to November 2004, the Long-Range Planning Committee studied JHH's core services, what they have been, and what they could be in the next 15 years. One of its first efforts was to examine the characteristics of a Jewish environment and to evaluate how those characteristics affect JHH's current and future work. Their assessment sought to strategically realign and define the areas in which JHH could increase, improve, or update its Jewish forms of expression and connection. The committee explored how Jewish values, symbols, foods, holiday celebrations, and educational opportunities for residents and staff can positively contribute to making the environment in the facility more like a "Jewish home."

### JHH's Jewish Values

Through research into JHH's history, the Long-Range Planning Committee first explored the Jewish values that motivated the women of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun and that continue to provide the framework for the agency's purpose today.

Honoring one's parents is the first of the Ten Commandments that concerns our relationship with people in addition to our relationship with God: "Honor your father and your mother, as God has commanded you, that you may long endure and that you may fare well in the land that God is giving you" (Deuteronomy 5:16). The Talmud teaches that honoring one's parents is primarily a physical act, such that children are obligated to "help them to eat and drink, clothe them and cover them, and help them to go in and out" (Kiddushin 31b).

The Jewish value of *Hiddur P'nei Zaken*—respect for the elderly—has guided the Jewish community to "rise before the aged and show respect to the elderly" (Leviticus 19:32). Respecting elders encompasses community efforts in supporting them in activities of daily living and providing

them continued opportunities for study, socialization, and religious practice. "Even in old age they shall bear fruit, they shall be full of vigor and strength" (Psalm 92:15).

The concept of *Tikkun Olam*—healing or repairing the world—suggests that the world itself is incomplete, broken, and in need of repair. This concept is manifested in many ways, including concern with public policy and societal change, as well as a notion that the world can be fixed by the activity of human beings in partnership with God. *Tikkun Olam* places an emphasis on educating the community about social and moral issues and taking actions to achieve social justice. As it is written, "Justice, justice shall you pursue" (Deuteronomy 16:20). Thus it is an intrinsic element of Judaism that Jews should not practice ethics only within the Jewish community but also must extend justice and compassion throughout the world.

For many centuries, the teaching, *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*—all Israel is responsible for one another (Talmud, Shavuot 39a)—has stressed the Jewish people's obligation to care for Jews throughout the world who are suffering, threatened, or in need. Judaism teaches that "to save one person is to save the world" (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5). Furthermore, it extends the responsibility to people of all faiths. Finally, the teaching of *B'tselem Elohim*—that all humans are created in the image of God—emphasizes the sacred worth of all people. Each person, therefore, regardless of socioeconomic status, handicap, or any other limitation, must be accorded dignity and respect.

From its inception, the agency's founders believed in the importance of the broader community and the responsibility toward the "stranger." As Dr. Leo wrote in the 1910 Annual Report (p.10), the Home is

an open door with friendly greeting for the old, worn and weary stranger. It is a Hebrew Home, and as such, those adherents of the ancient creed understand its significance. Thousands have been recipients of its hospitality, and from the day it first announced its mission, and readiness to fulfill and discharge

the obligations it assumed, there has been no halt, but each year growing larger and more ample in its scope to meet increasing demands.

It is with these values that JHH strives to create a welcoming and nurturing environment for the Jewish community. Yet, a careful balance needs to be maintained between the agency's obligations to the Jewish elders and to the members of the broader community residing together in its facilities.

#### **Jewish Life at JHH before the Planning Process**

On each of its three campuses, residents engaged in Jewish learning and celebration, and their involvement took a variety of expressions. Residents and clients attended Jewish discussions and programs focused on culture, current events, trivia, and entertainment on a weekly or biweekly basis. There were both Yiddish and Hebrew books and movies in the library. The rabbinic leadership comprised two full-time and one part-time rabbi on each campus, as well as a part-time cantor at the Manhattan Division. These clergy coordinated and led Shabbat and holiday programs, services, and festive meals. Clergy of all major faiths were employed on a part-time basis, and Christian and Catholic celebrations, services, and study groups were also held weekly or biweekly at all campuses.

Before each Jewish holiday the Religious Life department coordinated programs for the entire JHH community, as well as on individual floors. In addition to the weekly scheduled programs, JHH clergy also provided individual pastoral care for residents and families, offering spiritual and emotional guidance on an as-needed basis. On an intermittent basis residents were joined by representatives of Jewish schools, agencies, synagogues, and universities from the surrounding Jewish communities. These communal affiliations provided recreational program support and countless hours of volunteer service throughout each year—bringing younger

students to sing and play games with residents, recruiting volunteers to assist during the Jewish holidays and for special events, and providing entertainment and transport for special programs. Eight rabbinical, cantorial, and Jewish communal student interns worked in the religious services and administration departments in 2004 as well.

Despite this variety of Jewish expression and activity, the Long-Range Planning Committee believed that a more comprehensive, regular, and continuous approach to Jewish life was necessary in order to strategically increase the number of Jewish clients and to reverse the trend of the declining Jewish population in the agency's programs. It hoped that the guidance of the long-range plan would facilitate an increase in Jewish ambiance, programming, and celebrations that would attract and support current and future residents.

#### **Four Strategic Initiatives**

The Long-Range Planning Committee's findings created a strategy to foster and further develop spiritual life throughout the system. The committee identified four strategic areas to shape JHH's overall daily life, thereby enhancing the presence of its Jewish life in the future. It recommended that, to reorient JHH and reshape its "Jewishness," the leadership needed to reemphasize spiritual and religious life for all residents, families, and employees living, working, and connected with JHH. The four areas of ambiance, spiritual and religious forms of expression, staff education, and community connections provide a framework in which to view Jewish life and nurture a vibrant Jewish community for JHH's clients. At the same time, the committee sought to implement changes that would enhance the overall spiritual environment so as to balance the needs of all residents and staff.

#### ***Ambiance***

What makes a Jewish Home feel Jewish? The Long-Range Planning Committee ex-

plored the Jewish ambiance at other facilities, interviewed top leaders in the Jewish community, and analyzed recent demographic data on the New York Jewish community, hoping to better understand how a Jewish Home looks, smells, tastes, and feels (Beck, Ukeles, & Miller, 2004). Its recommendations were comprehensive, charting a course to raise awareness among residents, visitors, and staff that they are living in, visiting, or working in a Jewish Home. Studies have shown that ambiance alone can be reason enough for older Jews to choose a Jewish nursing home. They "may not be familiar with traditional worship services," but want to live in a place that feels "comfortable" (Kozberg 1997).

Enhancing the visual appearance of its facilities by mirroring the visual appearance of Jewish family homes with Jewish artwork and ritual objects on display was one core approach. The plan called for *mezzuzot* to hang on all major public doorways and for residents to have the option to hang one on their doorways. Jewish ritual objects were to be on display throughout the facilities. Additionally, calendars already posted on each unit would reflect Jewish holidays and events. Signs welcoming visitors to the facilities were to offer religious service times for Jewish and Christian worship.

The Jewish ambiance would be enhanced by creating additional tastes and smells of a Jewish home on each campus. Currently the facilities serve only prepackaged kosher food, and the committee's plan called for reviewing this policy. It recommended that Jewish holiday and Shabbat foods be served in the staff dining facilities and in the communities where elders live so that the familiar smells of familial foods could permeate the facilities. Elders would be able to enjoy increased opportunities to sample Jewish menus and foods on special holidays and on an ongoing basis as well.

The committee recommended enhancing the ambiance through additional Jewish programming and activities, emphasizing importance of reaching clients where

they are—throughout the facilities or in their own homes. It recommended installing a broadcasting system to reach frailer elders and even clients in the larger community with religious services and programs. A closed-circuit television system has already been installed at the Bronx campus, enabling worship services and even performances from the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y to be broadcast throughout the facility. The number of volunteer groups that visit the home has been increased, resulting in the formation of new partnerships and increased Jewish programming, Jewish text studies, discussions, and music.

### *Spiritual Practice and Religious Observance*

The committee's second focus and strategic intervention revolved around spiritual practice for all residents. Some would argue, like Monsignor Charles Fahey (1986), that religion is the "most important" element in the lives of older adults. Studies show that religion has an especially positive effect on their mental and physical health (Keonig, Moberg, & Kvale, 1988). Ritual moments give residents and clients "hopes for the future" by allowing them to enjoy the cyclical nature of all religious celebration, with the goals of reliving these moments annually (Friedman, 1995).

The committee recommended that JHH more strongly recognize the Jewish (social, religious, cultural, emotional) roots of the residents, helping them maintain connections with their home communities while also increasing the number of Shabbat and Jewish holiday programs for the residents as well as clients in the community-based programs. It further recommended that community-wide partnerships and coalitions be created to ensure that seniors residing in the community have access and connections to community synagogues and churches. Clients living in the community would also be encouraged to and supported in their participation in religious services transmitted via phone or television

The committee's recommendations called for a reevaluation of the spiritual and religious needs of the caregivers and families of residents and clients and how to fulfill those needs. Recognizing the need for caregivers to express themselves spiritually and emotionally, it recommended the creation of religious services and spiritual support groups for the community of caregivers. Conducting a caregiver needs assessment was recommended, and spiritual needs would be included in the survey.

The committee also recommended that JHH analyze how organizations, Jewish nursing homes in particular, observe Jewish holidays organizationally. How can an environment express the sacred nature of the Jewish and non-Jewish holiday calendar to staff? How can staff feel a sense of celebration during all religious holidays? Currently, Jewish holidays are not observed throughout JHH's facilities, and the celebration of observances does not permeate the facilities or enrich the lives of staff and elders. JHH offices are open on Jewish holidays, and observant employees have the flexibility to take four personal holidays each year as they choose.

In response, the committee recommended that JHH institute "quiet days" to recognize religious holidays. These "quiet days" would encourage staff to become involved with the elders at services and would discourage staff from either scheduling large meetings on Jewish and Christian holidays, attending outside training seminars, or engaging in other business practices and events. They would create an atmosphere emphasizing holiday observance by distinguishing these days and making them more sacred.

### *Staff Education and Learning*

The third focus was on staff education and learning, recognizing that employees need to understand and be empowered in order to support JHH's Jewish mission. It cannot be taken for granted that employees "just know" the mission and Jewish values that guide JHH's work. This process of

change, of building a strategically Jewish environment, required the support of all staff.

A 1991 study of 186 LTC and housing facilities, under the auspices of the North American Association of Jewish Homes and Housing for the Aged (now AJAS), showed that training on Jewish topics was not perceived negatively, but rather attracted the same number of staff as other training topics in more than 75 percent of the facilities surveyed (Reingold, Weiner, & Holmes, 1991). This training not only broadly educated the staff on general concepts but also provided them with "Jewish approaches" to care and assistance, which were critical to ensuring that the Jewish residents felt comfortable in the environment (Elazar, 1995). The training allowed line staff the opportunity to learn about important institutional values and ensured that they felt engaged and had the knowledge and ability to create programs that reflected these values.

The committee's recommendations reflected the need to bring employees into the process of changing the institutional culture through the following means: creating an orientation piece on caring for the Jewish elderly, conducting ongoing staff development programs around holidays and rituals, placing articles on Jewish topics in the staff newsletter, and informing staff and allowing them to attend outside conferences and seminars on topics dealing with aging and Judaism.

Another area of learning potential recognized by the committee was the increased importance of internships for students. It recommended that JHH double the number of internships for rabbinical, cantorial, and Jewish communal service students. Students would be encouraged to apply and strengthen their Jewish programming and administrative skills while working with elders and staff. JHH plans to work to become a Continuing Professional Education training site for students focusing in pastoral care.

### **Community Connection**

The final strategic approach to raising the level of Jewish influence in JHH and its work was to strengthen existing and to create new partnerships within the New York Jewish community to foster enhanced programming, utilize community resources, market services to Jewish constituencies, and support an increase in JHH's Jewish nature. It was also recommended that JHH pursue involvement in more community events and encourage community members to become regular visitors, volunteers, and participants in programs and celebrations in the Homes.

To implement these recommendations, the marketing department is working with Jewish communal groups to raise awareness of JHH and the role it plays in neighboring communities. Advertisements have been placed in local synagogue bulletins on such topics as wellness, aging, and caregiver resources. It is planned that the JHH Web site be expanded to include additional information about Shabbat and holiday programming taking place in the Homes, inviting outside constituencies to attend, volunteer, and become more involved. Finally, the marketing department plans to make outreach to the Jewish media a priority as a venue to post job and volunteer opportunities, as well as a place to communicate the richness of the system.

Implementing these initiatives required that the system reach out to the clergy in the community. The plan established that working closely with local rabbis and local leaders of other faiths would become a priority by creating an advisory board for each home.

Finally, JHH has strengthened its relationship to UJA-Federation of New York. More staff are attending UJA-Federation staff development workshops and becoming active in the UJA-Federation campaign; lay leaders are being encouraged to connect more strongly with this partner. Finally, JHH is acting as a volunteer site for UJA-Federation lay leadership, giving them the opportunity to spend time with the elders while learning

more about how their generosity is helping others.

### **STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS**

The Long-Range Plan: A Vision for 2020 developed and approved by the JHH board lays out strategic steps to increase the Jewish nature of the organization. The Long-Range Planning Committee sought to promote a more strategic approach to Jewish expression in the hopes of leading JHH in the direction of becoming a more comprehensive and effective Jewish organization. Ultimately, "strategic planning is about caring," and the Jewish pillar clearly reflects how the committee feels about serving one of the core missions of the organization (Austin, 2002).

The committee has the ultimate goal of helping JHH reach out to more groups and potential clients in the community and provide current residents and clients with an enhanced Jewish cultural and religious experience. By so doing, the nursing home will be viewed as a Jewish Home, and it will be better able to provide a meaningful and rich environment for residents, staff, and families.

JHH wanted to deepen and nurture a vibrant Jewish community in which religious, spiritual, and cultural Jewish life can thrive and the final stage of life is strongly supported by Jewish values for those who live, work, and visit here. JHH's leadership believed that Jewish principles that support individual dignity and value human life should always guide the agency's work. These spiritual values enable it to care for the entire community in a manner that values spiritual and religious life for all clients, family members, and staff. The long-range plan's recommendations support JHH in fulfilling the most sacred task of "respecting our parents" and ensuring that the core mission to serve fellow Jews remains constant.

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