

THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF FEDERATIONS FOR ISRAEL AND WORLD JEWRY

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Jews have always had a mandate to care for one another. Judaism flourishes in a communal setting that broadens this responsibility beyond the personal. Ever since the dispersion of the Jewish people after the destruction of the Temple, there has been a need to identify a series of cohesive forces that enable us to sustain ourselves.

The federation system, which dates back more than 100 years, was built on the concept of domestic service through community building. Through a series of increasingly sophisticated steps, federations began extending their central role of sponsoring the annual fundraising campaign by moving into allocating funds to local and national beneficiary agencies.

The initial focus of federations in the domestic fields of health and human services was a clear and obvious response to 19th-century American culture. For decades, while federations gained their footing in North America, their focus remained local and national, and their function continued to be targeted toward the secular side of Jewish communal life.

During the 1930s, a series of organizations developed in North America that paralleled the federation from a community perspective, but raised and distributed funds solely for overseas purposes. Working through the national United Jewish Appeal, these organizations generally attracted a separate cadre of lay leaders whose background and orientation differed significantly from those associated with the federation movement. The domestically oriented leaders were more assimilated, the product of early generations of German Jewry; the overseas oriented were more recent Eastern European immigrants. For many years, some communities experienced intense competition between these two main streams of American

Jewish philanthropy, both for leadership and for funds. It was obvious that federations were not yet ready to assume the responsibility that would have been required to broaden their mandate, and in many instances, there was no sense of commitment to even consider such possibilities.

Through a series of world-shaking events, embodied by the Holocaust, World War II, and the establishment of the State of Israel, what once appeared to be two distinct agendas that might have operated in parallel for years to come began to appear to many as complementary undertakings, worthy of efficiencies that could be achieved through merger. One by one, during the middle of the 20th century, federations found ways to broaden their mandate, culminating with the most recent local merger of significance in 1986: the creation of the UJA Federation of New York.

The creation of United Jewish Communities from the 1999 merger of the United Jewish Appeal, United Israel Appeal, and the Council of Jewish Federations represented the final step in the process of consolidating the domestic and overseas community building presence through the federations of North America. It is well known that the creation of UJC required considerable trust on the part of the overseas service delivery arm, which controlled the United Jewish Appeal. It also should remind the federation movement that its responsibility for overseas activities is fundamental to its mission. In the decades since the achievement of local mergers, this reality has become blurred.

At the community level, the responsibility for overseas services in Israel and throughout the world is reflected by the extent to which each federation provides funding for such endeavors. Ever since mergers began at the community level, a balance has had to be

achieved between what had been an exclusive focus on the part of each partner in the merger, which when absorbed into an overall entity, lost its singular commitment to those needs. The tracking system for monitoring this balance has been the relative percentage of funds raised and allocated for overseas and domestic purposes.

Assessing the degree of responsibility that federations assume for overseas needs has inevitably required a view through the lens of available resources. Anyone who has participated in allocation processes at the local level understands certain realities: that it is much easier to grasp activities in one's own community than it is elsewhere in the world; that local agency services are confronted on an ongoing basis; that unless they travel overseas, allocation committee members may never see that work in action; and that political advocates for local services are those with whom we have personal relationships, whereas overseas advocates will be more remote or even invisible. How can one grapple with such a series of dichotomies?

One source of strength to build on is the "living bridge" that has been established between so many federations and our overseas brethren as embodied by Partnership 2000 *keshet* (connection) efforts operationalized through twinning Israeli regions with our communities, sister city relationships with cities in the FSU, and ongoing work that is carried out by volunteers and professionals on both sides of the ocean. This is an area of interaction that should familiarize us with the needs and the potential for meeting those needs. Many of the activities of JAFI and JDC are suited to this new way of working, something that would have been impossible before the collapse of the Soviet Union and before the era of instant communication. Now that those obstacles have been overcome and there is a highly knowledgeable constituency that can help guide our actions, we should be able to build on this asset to embrace our achievements.

United Jewish Communities was created, among other reasons, to provide a trustwor-

thy and clear overseas needs assessment and funding distribution process, another factor that should have helped raise consciousness of the overseas reality. During the first years of UJC, the ONAD (Overseas Needs Assessment and Distribution) process could not live up to the high expectations heaped on it. Nevertheless, ONAD enhanced advocacy for overseas needs through the federation movement, as reflected through the creation of overseas services committees in virtually every federation, which had not existed to any great extent before the formation of UJC. The representatives serving on ONAD were also familiarized with overseas services through major presentations and through missions abroad. Yet, while ONAD continued to be the lightning rod for the ongoing debate over the proportion of annual campaign funds allocated for overseas needs versus those retained locally and nationally, it achieved only some of its objectives. Although allocations during the final years of UJA dropped by fully 10 percent, and although that figure has now stabilized under UJC, the growth in support through ONAD that many hoped for has not been realized.

To understand the challenge to federations that overseas needs represent, we must consider the amount of money provided for those services. If the money that would be available for such services must come from the annual federation campaign, then that finite amount, even if it is able to grow from year to year, will never be sufficient for the federation movement to meet its commitments to Israel and overseas needs, unless that would take place at the expense of other beneficiaries.

In recent years increasing numbers of leaders have come to believe that overseas needs should not represent one of the major responsibilities for federations. Instead, they believe that federations should preserve local communities. This argument is usually joined with the declaration that, with the economic development of the State of Israel, an \$80-plus billion economy should be able

to respond to such needs without outside support.

We need to come to terms with this argument by first coming to terms with the reality—that much of the high welfare need in Israel is due to the costs of absorbing new immigrants and compensating for deficiencies in the absorption of earlier immigration. The responsibility for shouldering that burden is rightfully shared with world Jewry. What other country takes in the aged and infirm without consideration of cost? None. Would we want to hinder that effort? I hope not.

One of our most accessible Jewish sources, *Pirkei Avot* — the Sayings of our Fathers — provides us with a simple vehicle to better understand how we should respond to overseas needs. Certainly one of the most well-known Jewish admonitions was uttered by the prophet Hillel. In Chapter 1:13, he is quoted as saying, “If I am not for myself, who is for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?” Does Hillel distinguish the locus of the need?

In Chapter 2: 18, Rabbi Tarfon is quoted as saying: “The day is short, the work is much, the workmen are lazy, the reward is great and the master is pressing.” Has our very success led us to grow complacent, to seek personal gratification at the expense of others?

In Chapter 3:19, Rabbi Akiva is quoted as saying: “Everything is given on collateral and a net is spread over all the living: the shop is open, the shopkeeper extends credit, the ledger is open, the hand writes, and whoever wishes to borrow may come and borrow. The collectors make their rounds regularly, each day, and exact payment from man with or without his knowledge (of his debt) and they have on what to rely. The judgment is a judgment of truth, and everything is prepared for the feast.” Can we be shaken by the realization that we are being judged and may be found wanting?

In Chapters 5, 9, and 12, we learn about four types of people: “He who says, ‘what is mine is yours and what is yours is yours,’ is

pious. There are four types among those who give charity: . . . the pious one is he who begrudges himself, that he should give and others should too.” Has our American experience, which views charity as a free-will offering, led us to lose sight of the Jewish view that *tzedekah* is an obligation and not a choice?

If we have debated for decades how to meet domestic and overseas responsibilities, why is it that that debate in the federation world has taken place solely in the context of our annual campaign? Clearly this is because the funds available from the annual campaigns in each community are seen as the only resource to meet these needs. In a world in which the potential to support philanthropic activity would appear to be unlimited, why have we not broadened our horizons? Why have we viewed it as a zero-sum game? Although it is true that in times of crisis, special emergency efforts have enlarged the available pool of funding for overseas purposes, the pool has receded once those resources have been distributed.

We Jews in North America are collectively the most prosperous community the Jewish world has ever known. With something on the order of 13 million Jews in the world, we have an inordinate share of the wealth. Too often it would appear that many of us lose track and seem to think that our great good fortune has been due solely to our innate ability and talent, without recognizing that we are living in societies that have made our achievements possible. Without cultures that have enabled us to flourish, all the talent in the world would not have helped. We need to ask ourselves how successful we would be if we lived in Minsk or Kishinev.

Federations need to have the confidence that, if we qualify and quantify the needs that exist overseas, we will be able to find a way to raise the funds to meet those needs, both through the annual campaign and through supplemental endeavors as well, which will bring more money to the table. Viewed through the philosophy of our great Jewish thinkers, it is obvious that we have no

choice. Our personal wealth has not been made available to us solely for our own benefit, not if we are inclined to view the world from a truly Jewish perspective. We were not put on this earth just to meet our own requirements, but also to carry out the will of *Hashem*. And who are we to think that there should be a limit to helping those who have not been as fortunate as us, and who clearly will never have the opportunity to meet their basic needs without our support? It is our duty to perform that *mitzvah*.

One of the truly unique aspects of the federation is its community-building mission. No other organization in the Jewish world shares this imperative to the same extent. It is also safe to say that federations have always taken on new functions more slowly than conditions might have warranted. One example, is the Soviet Jewry movement. In its earliest days, the Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union operated outside the mainstream. They advocated for a single agenda: freedom and opportunity for Jews of the Soviet Union. This was not seen as an agenda that was likely to pay great dividends. Because of that perception and because fierce advocates for a single cause often do not want to be absorbed by consensus-building organizations, much of the early days of the Soviet Jewry movement took place outside the federation orbit. However, it would be just as correct to say that the goal of saving Soviet Jewry could never have been accomplished were it not for the fact that ultimately the federation world and many others did buy in to this agenda; major undertakings at the political and legislative level, as well as the dramatic march on Washington D.C. during the late 1980s, were also able to achieve prominence for an idea that had very little visibility in federations initially.

When one considers the community-building mandate of the federation and the responsibilities of Jewish peoplehood, it is hard to justify why overseas needs are less prominent, especially at a time when needs

in the Jewish world are as significant in some ways as ever.

For Jews of the former Soviet Union the possibilities for individual initiative are greater than they have been in years, but the probabilities of success are severely limited. Many of the best and brightest left to make aliyah or went West or elsewhere. Those who remain, largely the elderly, have no chance of living their final years of life with dignity — unless we help. Subsisting on meager pensions, which even when they are paid will not meet daily needs, leaves them adrift in a society without a social safety net. What are they to do?

One answer to the needs of the Jews of the former Soviet Union is to meet them through other resources, such as reparations payments and settlements with banks and insurance companies. Yet, those resources are available only to victims of Nazi persecution. Hundreds of thousands do not meet those qualifications, and they suffer because of it. Even those who do qualify by no means live in the lap of luxury.

And what of the young Jews of the FSU, who live in an environment in which a vast majority of Jews intermarry? Without Jewish education and activity, they — and the future of the community — will surely wither.

Meanwhile, the remaining Jews of Ethiopia, among the poorest in the world, have few skills to survive in a developing world. They have no way to get to Israel on their own. During a period of economic turmoil, Israel has little hope of helping beyond providing food, clothing, and shelter — commodities in short supply in Ethiopia and therefore not to be taken lightly. Nevertheless, for these Jews to succeed, remedial education is the only hope.

Well over one million Jews in Israel, a huge portion of whom are children, are living at or below the poverty level. Many of the Ethiopians already there will slip into a permanent underclass unless they get help. Sadly, Israel can meet only so many needs while defending its existence and rationalizing its budget priorities. An \$80 billion econ-

omy is unable to rise to the challenge, no different from North American governments with structural challenges characteristic of most developed societies.

What are we to make of these few needs, as well as others? And what are we to do about them once we have identified them?

The resources are certainly available in the North American Jewish community to rise to these challenges while meeting ongoing domestic commitments. Is the federation annual campaign as successful as it might be? Of course not. Does it have the capacity to grow? It has, and it will. Is it one of the most phenomenal ongoing fundraising efforts in history? Undeniably. On the other hand, even the most successful annual campaign, year after year, could never come close to tapping the available resources in the North American Jewish community required to support these and other needs. We just need to be smarter in terms of making the case and broadening the opportunities for giving.

UJC must be the vehicle for turning this promise into reality, and the federations and UJC have to build the working relationship that will enable us to achieve that goal.

When times are tough, the normal instinct is to protect one's core businesses. The annual campaign is our core business. Yet, every business model reveals that protectionism leads to a decline in market share, not maintenance of the status quo.

We Jews have a unique ability to do what needs to be done when we are committed to a particular course of action. We Jews also have the unique ability to drag ourselves down and to find fault with what we do. UJC has inherited many of these strengths and weaknesses. However, I believe this is the time for us to rise to the challenge and lead a much more expansive agenda within our community, one that will be compelling to major philanthropists who have determined that they can be more productive following their own advice and counsel. I also believe we can bring a broader base of community participation to the table, thus addressing our

initial fundamental responsibility for community building.

Although some have used the ONAD process as a way of critiquing UJC during its early years, we have the capability of using that very same area of responsibility as an example of how we can move forward aggressively together in the days ahead. In this way, we can define UJC's value-added elements to our system and identify the achievements that can only be realized because UJC, together with federations, fashioned them and implemented them.

Much has been written in these pages and elsewhere about new campaign and financial resource development models. Total financial resource development has become a series of buzzwords; collaborative fundraising, a dream; and the university-based model, a methodology to which we aspire. However, moving in any of these directions requires more than rhetoric. It means truly being committed to working in a new manner. Getting there will require us to create a new reality, one in which UJC, the Jewish Agency for Israel, JDC, and the federations work in a much more seamless manner—where we view individual goals as complementary rather than competitive and where we recognize that by setting a more comprehensive and strategic agenda, we will reignite the enthusiasm for our cause that has not been lost, but has been diminished by years of failure to see our common vision.

Finally, we need to challenge ourselves further by realizing there is no dichotomy between local needs versus overseas needs, just Jewish needs. And who are we to think that mere geography should define the essence of a peoplehood, which was galvanized by the words of *Hashem* as passed on to us by Moshe at Sinai? Who are we to think that any element of the Jewish agenda should be compartmentalized? Who are we to think that Jewish continuity is just an issue to be decided and debated in our own city, or even nationally, rather than globally? Too often we think that Jewish continuity is just an

issue for the Diaspora and not also a problem in Israel or elsewhere.

The Jewish federation movement and UJC do have a sacred mission. Shame on us if we unduly limit ourselves and think that if we just do the job that presents itself comfortably, we will have met our responsibilities. We will not have done so, and history will judge that we were found wanting.

Let us rise to the challenge. Let us recog-

nize that the maintenance of Jewish peoplehood requires the work of a variety of organizations in the Jewish world, many of whom have a significant and vital role to play in this arena. None has a more expansive role than the federation. In a world of single focus, we have a rich alternative that we can better promote. Now is the time. Now is the time to write the next chapter in our history.

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