

## RALPH'S SPARK

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I once read a story about a wise man from the town of Chelm named Moshe. He decides to leave Chelm and explore the world. Moshe plans to travel by train so he arrives at the station by horse, walks into the waiting room, and sits. He sits and sits and after awhile decides that he must have arrived somewhere new and exotic. He exits the station and is amazed. The town he has "traveled to" looks just like his hometown; the inhabitants have similar personalities and are dealing with the same issues.

This story relates to my year as a Ralph I. Goldman Fellow. I went to the airport and sat; when I arrived I realized that there were so many similarities among the Jewish communities I visited. There were questions about Jewish identity, questions about meaning, questions about funding, and questions about how to reach out to the unaffiliated; somehow, I felt like I never left home. My year as a Fellow was spent with amazing leaders, speaking about that which matters to us most—community and how to ensure that future generations have the ability to connect, interpret, and feel strong in their identity as Jews.

In both Bucharest and Moscow, where I spent the majority of my Fellowship year, I felt at home. I realized that we are all struggling with, feeling challenged by, being inspired by, and dreaming about the same Jewish communal issues: How can we build stronger communities? How can we grapple with the forces of assimilation? How do we compete with other interests and groups?

For many years I have heard of the concept of *pintele yid*, the spirit or essence of a Jew. This Yiddish expression means literally

the "point" that defines or distinguishes someone's Jewish character and nature.

I spent my Ralph I. Goldman Fellowship with people who were for the most part in the process of rediscovering their Jewishness. Yet, the *pintele yid* within each individual was recognizable from the moment I met these distant relatives. Their determination. Their pride. Their hope. This was their "point of Jewishness." The *pintele yid* was defined for me. The leaders that JDC supports and nurtures became my role models and my heroes.

The Ralph Goldman Fellowship allowed me to see both the big and the small picture. I was able to live in and visit Jewish communities in transition. I saw communities developing programs, becoming more self-reliant, benefiting from skills and leadership training to ensure a vibrant future. I, like a citizen of Chelm, never really had to leave the station or travel far to arrive in communities that reminded me of home and taught me so much.

Witnessing the spark of Jewishness that manifests itself in individuals in the smallest village or in a city program or in a family camp showed me how individuals persevere against the greatest forces and retain their *pintele yid*. JDC enabled me to see that our world is full of exciting expressions of Jewish life and that these forms of Jewishness are only increasing and deepening.

I learned so many things from Ralph Goldman, but two things remain at the forefront of my mind: that the Jewish world is accessible through one station and that each person with whom and on behalf of whom JDC works contains a sacred spark.

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