

LOOKING FORWARD

Our Three-Pronged Challenge and Opportunity

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The creation of caring communities, the renewal of Jewish life, and the strengthening of Jewish peoplehood are three inter-related goals that constitute our agenda. By fulfilling this agenda, we will make a powerful contribution not only to our Jewish future but also to Western culture.

We are at an extraordinary moment in Jewish history. As American Jews, we have taken our place in an accepting and generous society and achieved a level of status and success far beyond what our parents and grandparents could dream of. In New York in particular, large segments of our community enjoy unprecedented affluence, influence and acceptance.

We have been essential partners in creating and securing a Jewish state that is moving, however bumpily, on the road to peace and that is already prosperous beyond our earlier imagining. We are also rescuing 80,000 Jews annually from the former Soviet Union. Yet while such work remains critical to who we are, we are necessarily turning more and more of our attention to basic existential issues of Jewishness and Judaism. We are now able to shape our own destiny and even our Jewish identity as never before. Judaism is no longer a condition imposed upon us; it is an intention we are invited to exercise. And because of this, we have the unique opportunity to foster a genuine renewal of Jewish life in North America, in Israel and throughout the world.

During the first fifty years of the 20th century, our primary mission was to meet basic needs and help the first and second generation of immigrants integrate into American society. For the next fifty, while continuing to meet pressing local needs, our mission expanded to

include the rescue of Jews throughout the world and to serve as integral partners in building the Jewish state. Notwithstanding the awesome and irredeemable tragedy of the Holocaust, we have enjoyed remarkable success in accomplishing these tasks. In the 21st century, our third era, we must do more; our challenge is to become catalysts and resources for the creation of compelling Jewish communities that respond to our deepest needs and aspirations.

Today, we ask ourselves very different questions than those faced by our grandparents and great-grandparents:

- How can we, at the most elemental human level, create compassionate Jewish communities that provide care for those in need and whose members reach out to and are there for one another in times of joy and in times of sorrow?
- How can we strengthen and renew Jewish life, making our communities and traditions a source of enduring meaning and purpose, so that they can serve as an antidote to the frenetic quality of modern life?
- How can we strengthen the sense of *Klal Yisrael*, Jewish peoplehood, across geographic boundaries, at a time when Jewish life is not physically threatened? To put it differently: what will now provide the glue for Jewish solidarity so that we can reverse the growing divisions among our people?

This article is based on a presentation given at the annual meeting of the UJA-Federation of New York on December 8, 1999, shortly after Dr. Ruskay assumed his present position as its Executive Vice President and CEO.

In this era, when narcissism is often the norm, we Jews stand proudly, declaring that we are responsible for one another, that we see ourselves as a global Jewish people, with a

three-pronged mission that transcends geographical barriers.

A COMPASSIONATE COMMUNITY

Gmilut Chassidim, acts of loving kindness, whether visiting the sick in our own congregations or reaching out to feed the hungry of other faiths, are deeply rooted in our tradition. I think of the holiday that speaks to me most powerfully, Passover, when we celebrate and re-enact our people's Exodus from Egypt. Several years ago, Letty Cottin Pogrebin captured the power of Passover when she wrote:

Eventually I came to understand why Jews everywhere in the world repeat the Exodus story: because the Exodus is the core event of Jewish history. It is the experience which defines us as a people....Most people who have been oppressed try to forget it; we insist on remembering our slavery for a purpose that becomes a mandate: to stay connected with human suffering even after we ourselves have ceased to suffer....We in the here-and-now are expected to enter fully and completely into the experience of the Exodus, to feel the feelings of the alien, the minority group, the outsider. Now here's the point: Exodus 23:9—"You are not to oppress the stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger"—is the commandment that speaks most passionately to many of us: It is God's commandment to empathize....I now welcome the Seder's repetition of this ritual of empathy....I see it as a directive for each of us to enter the experience of the other, for a man to work hard to understand how it feels to be a woman, for grown-ups to remember what it feels like to be a child, for white people to imagine what a person of color experiences every day, for the able-bodied to put themselves in the place of those who are old and frail, disabled and sick, and for Jews to imagine how we would feel if we were Palestinians.

The mandate is deceptively simple. Imitate God. Imitate what God did for you for others. This is our task and this is what makes us Jews, not how we worship, or where we live, or the food we eat, or what organizations we belong

to, but how much we perform the liberatory work that made us a people in the first place.

For me, her words capture the animating spirit of our health and human service agencies.

One of North American Jewry's most extraordinary achievements during the twentieth century has been creating a network of human service agencies that have changed the landscape of this entire sector in the United States. These agencies provide meals for the hungry, assist the homebound and elderly, and organize therapeutic programs for children and families with emotional disabilities, as well as vocational training that serves those in need within the Jewish community and beyond. Their expertise and standards of service are the envy of every other religious and ethnic group.

But now, in addition to raising awareness of and support for the extraordinary work of our human service agencies, we must do more. We must integrally link our human service institutions to Jewish Community Centers, camps, synagogues, Hillels and other places where Jews regularly gather, so that these gateway institutions develop the capacity to serve and nurture those within their midst.

Clearly, government cannot and should not pay for such initiatives. However, I am firmly convinced that if we can "operationalize" the vision of connecting human service agencies with the critical gateway institutions, then we will raise the necessary funds.

If we are successful, what might a truly caring Jewish community look like in a decade?

Imagine every synagogue, in cooperation with our human service agencies, having a social worker, pastoral counselor, or therapist available to counsel parents on their children's developmental challenges; respond to the daunting and debilitating problems of marital strife, domestic violence, or terminal illness; and refer members to appropriate Jewish agencies. Imagine every Hillel having within its walls a social worker to respond to the loneliness and identity crises young adults experience during college. Imagine each of our community centers with such personnel, as well as programs for the well and frail elderly.

Imagine individuals and families who cross the portals of synagogues, community centers, and Hillels being welcomed by professionals who both identify and track their specific issues, interests, and problems and then are able to reflect and teach what Judaism has to offer.

Traditionally, Jewish acts of caring, visiting the sick, comforting the mourner, and extending help to the widow strengthened the fabric of the Jewish community. Creating such a deep and broad-based sense of community must now be added to our agenda, even while we remain steadfast in responding to the needs of the homeless, the hungry, and the frail wherever they are.

FOSTERING COMPELLING AND INSPIRING JEWISH COMMUNITIES

What we once took for granted—a pervasive Jewish community—no longer can be presumed. Everywhere—in North America, Israel, and the former Soviet Union—being Jewish is no longer simply a matter of chance, but one of choice. Our challenge is to see to it that the Jewish communities we create are so appealing, compelling, rich, rewarding, and enduring, so responsive to our deepest needs and aspirations, that they render the choice perfectly obvious. If the communities we create are such—and they can be if we so will it and must be if we are serious—then they will impel those who stand at a crossroads to join us in the ancient and timeless adventure of living and acting Jewishly. If the communities we fashion are models of how free Jews have chosen to live lives of commitment and meaning, of deep personal satisfaction and of expansive public commitment, then they will truly embody an answer to the perennial question, “Why should I be Jewish?”

No small part of rising to that challenge of living richly Jewish lives in the modern world has to do with Jewish education. Thoughtful and sustained efforts to upgrade the quality of intensive Jewish education deserve and will receive our growing support. But we ought not ask of Jewish education that it alone carry the burden of the Jewish future. Education at its best provides people the skills they require to

participate in living communities. The toughest part of the challenge we face has less to do with those skills and more to do with those communities.

People will be moved to acquire Jewish skills only when they behold the living Jewish community as one of distinction and of devotion, an inspired community that can sear the soul. They will only be drawn to a community that offers an oasis of calm in the desert of an often shrill and cacophonous modernity, that helps launch them into a life of purpose and meaning. For if the organized Jewish community, both secular and religious, does not offer these transcendent and transforming possibilities, why bother? With all its riches, Judaism is a dead language unless it is the language of a living community.

For me, Judaism is a way of understanding and appreciating the gift of life itself. The Jewish summer camp I attended as a teen introduced me to the exhilaration of a participatory Jewish community. Reinforced by youth groups and through trips to Israel, these experiences provided the impetus for many of us to create the Havurah movement of the late 1960s. But all those experiences were about far more than personal exhilaration; they were also about learning deeply what the Book of Genesis intends by its insistence that “life is good,” and about appreciating and acting on the injunction *l’kadesh oto*, to sanctify life, to make it holy. I believe that our tradition is nothing less than a glorious, elaborate cultural repository that enables us to savor every breath of life and to value every human being as created *b’tzelem elohim*, in the image of God.

The search for meaning will proceed one way among our people in North America, Israel, and elsewhere throughout the Jewish world. The question we face is not whether our children will seek to balance their individualistic freedom with the warmth and obligations of community, and their unprecedented prosperity with rediscovered purpose. They will and they do. Rather, the question before us is: Will the Judaism they experience in our key gateway institutions be seen as offering community and meaning?

Seventy percent of American Jews are members of synagogues at some point in their lives. Some congregations are breathtaking in their magnetic power to transform peoples' lives. But the painful larger truth is that many, if not most, appear to be incapable of responding to the growing hunger of Jews for community and for intellectual and spiritual engagement.

Federations have undertaken numerous efforts to become partners with the religious denominations and synagogues toward a shared objective: strengthening and transforming synagogues into more powerful, inspiring, and welcoming communities. Now, in this era, the time has come to develop an ongoing partnership with our synagogues.

There are no silver bullets, no single solutions, for doing so. Nor can federations address the hunger for community alone; rather, we must partner with key institutions that stand on the front lines of this effort both here and abroad.

Looking forward, we must and will increase our efforts to enlarge the numbers of young people who experience such powerful living communities as Jewish day schools, Israel experience programs, Jewish summer camps, and youth groups. And we will redouble our efforts to strengthen programs at these and other institutions where Jews who were not raised in committed Jewish families or communities can be introduced to the joy and power of Jewish life.

STRENGTHENING JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD

The severe problems that confronted American Jewry three and four decades ago served as the impetus for the emergence of the federation system as an unequalled philanthropic and communal enterprise. They produced an overarching and unifying agenda for our people: building and defending the Jewish State, rescuing Jews from throughout the world, and fighting anti-Semitism. Our vulnerability, coupled with our social isolation, created strong group cohesiveness and a sense of mutual responsibility.

But today, as a colleague recently quipped,

we must now enter the "glue" business. Since the external environment no longer assures Jewish solidarity, we will have to do so ourselves. Two experiences I had may be helpful in illustrating the challenges we face:

Last year I escorted a couple known for their support of religious pluralism to Brooklyn to visit Mishkon, the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services' residential facility that provides care for children with severe mental and physical disabilities. For the most part, these children are from traditional families in Boro Park and Williamsburg; thus, the institution's tone is culturally sensitive to traditional families.

Most visitors I have brought to Mishkon are moved beyond words by the dedication of the staff. But in this case, when we got back to the car, the husband exclaimed, "I don't want another penny of mine going to these Haredi Jews! They are offensive. They contribute nothing to our people." Startled, I responded, "How can you say this? Are you really saying that because the parents or rabbis of these children understand Torah in different ways than we do, we shouldn't provide them help and care?" I asked the couple to ponder the enormous implications that this would have for the nature of Jewish peoplehood moving forward.

A second experience: 1988, Tiberias. I was a participant in an intensive dialogue among North American and Israeli Jews. Upon arriving, I saw that the schedule included a time for brief Shabbat morning service, and then plenary sessions and business meetings throughout the rest of the day.

I found the conference chair and told him, "*Chaver*, in North America, we do not have conferences where Shabbat is just another day. We find a way to observe it." He responded, "We don't; that's not who we are." I then said, "Can't we find a way to use the Shabbat for learning about one another? Let's study the Torah reading together and see how we each read the same text." He retorted, in a way that I will never forget, "Study the Torah reading? It would be like asking us to study about the life of Jesus."

We must reduce such contempt and rejection of other Jews and of the Jewish tradition. To try and do so, let us encourage the development of curricula, in North America, Israel, and elsewhere, that will help young Jews better understand and appreciate our shared history, culture, and destiny.

We should also undertake other initiatives—at first quietly, outside of the glare of the public forum—to reduce division and to increase mutual understanding and tolerance between religious and secular Jews. If we are successful, American Jews and Israeli Jews, our children and grandchildren, will find new ways of spending Shabbat together. And we as a community always will reach out to those in need, however they or their rabbis understand Torah.

Part of this work involves taking practical steps to help the new immigrant, who so often feels like a “stranger” or “resident alien,” feel more at home. It is necessary to intensify our efforts to facilitate the integration of the Russian émigré community in New York, now approaching 200,000, and to work in Israel to develop new approaches to speed the absorption of the far larger number of Russians into that society.

By any measure, Israel is an extraordinary success story, a celebration of human will, ingenuity, and devotion. The debates now unfolding there concern many thorny matters, from the proper relationship between state and religion and between Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews, to the best means to respond to the growing gap between Israel’s richest and its poorest citizens. These debates, including that about the very meaning of Jewish identity in the Jewish state, will be difficult and sometimes bitter. Here in North America, we will have to develop new mechanisms for contributing constructively to these disputes. However they unfold, our organizing premise is that Israel is not only the state of its citizens but also that of the Jewish people, that we are among its stakeholders and so must find ways to participate in its unfolding drama.

But strengthening Jewish peoplehood also must begin “at home,” within the walls of every

federation. We must be steadfast in our commitment to be inclusive and to welcome all who seek to stand with us. In particular, we should redouble our efforts to recruit women to all levels of lay and professional leadership.

The creation of caring communities, the renewal of Jewish life, and the strengthening of Jewish peoplehood are three inter-related goals that constitute our agenda, here in North America, in Israel, and throughout the Jewish world. During the past year, UJA-Federation of New York has undertaken a major reorganization that reflects our new vision of our essential work. Our new thematic commissions along these lines do not provide comprehensive answers to the challenges we face, but they do end the anachronistic division of needs and leadership between “domestic” and “overseas.” Our new structure recognizes that we have become a global Jewish people with a three-pronged mission that transcends geography.

No one leg of our mission eclipses any other; all the values alluded to here must work synergistically—and not only at UJA-Federation, but also at our agencies. Some agencies have focused on one leg of our mission; others have had multiple foci. Now, all of us—UJA-Federation and our agencies, staff and volunteers alike—must think of fresh, creative approaches to developing new paradigms that represent the creative interplay of the values of compassion, compelling and inspiring community, and Jewish peoplehood.

In particular, we will need to determine how both UJA-Federation and our agencies can contribute to the strengthening of community, particularly for those not raised in traditional families. In this, we must be thoughtfully and imaginatively proactive, appreciating how every leg of our mission and each of our agencies can engage people more deeply in Jewish life and community.

How will we meet the challenge of creating compassionate communities of meaning and purpose? We will only do so when we—

- respond to the prophetic mandate to seek justice, to reach out to those in need of physical and emotional healing

- work actively to strengthen the bonds between the organized Jewish community and those who are disaffected and disconnected from it
- reach out across the ocean to forge strong personal ties with Jews in other communities
- deepen our own connections to our faith and culture

But what of our annual campaign, itself a remarkable manifestation of Jewish communal values and Jewish peoplehood? While it sometimes has become a vehicle for individual donors who identify focused philanthropic agendas, we will remain firm in reiterating our commitment to extend our resources not only to our own communities but also to those that lack the financial means to provide basic services. Five years ago, many people predicted that federated giving was on the decline, that federations should evolve to become a vehicle for designated giving. But a funny thing happened on the road to donor designation. A large number of donors recognized that something quite precious was at stake: a network of institutions that span the globe and represent our sense of collective responsibility at a time when individualism sometimes seems to be running amuck. To put it differently: if we only support those institutions that we frequent, the network of international agencies that today miraculously rescue 80,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union, feed 175,000 Russian Jews, and serve the neediest Jews around the world will simply cease to exist.

Our donors heard us and have responded. Looking forward, we will continue to grow, renew, and deepen the federated campaign in this new philanthropic environment with multiple new initiatives.

The refocusing of our mission and the continued renewal of our resource development programs will be successful because we bring to this work one hundred years of experience in lay-professional collaboration. Our success, both in the past and moving forward, is directly linked to our ability to identify, recruit, and enlist the talent, energy, and imagination

of the most gifted lay leaders and professionals. Without both, our efforts will falter.

Beyond the goals stated above, we cannot focus on creating caring and inspired Jewish communities "out there" if we do not also focus on the needed transformation of the internal organizational culture of federation "in here." Too many still perceive federation as a Jewish taxing institution. While we sometimes have taken the generosity of our donors as a given, we must become an organization that consistently acknowledges and appreciates the trust so many place in us.

If federations are to help create inspired and caring communities, then the values they embody must shape how we conduct ourselves in our offices every day—volunteers to staff, staff to volunteers, and professionals to clerical staff. We must model the highest standards of integrity and seek out the views of the entire community.

For example, I hope that in the not-too-distant future, when a person enters a federation building, someone will greet the visitor with, "Welcome. How can I help you?" Imagine one of our meeting rooms being stocked with the best books, CDs, and films about Judaism. Imagine music filling our halls and photos and art on our walls reflecting our commitment to community, caring, and the embrace of our people's diversity. Imagine too, visitors being able to use technology that offers information and guidance about Jewish nursing homes and hospices or the nearest JCC and Jewish bookstore. Changing our organizational culture will not be easy or quick, but my colleagues and I pledge to place this matter high on our agenda and to stay with it.

In all our endeavors, we at federation must remember that we neither own nor manage the Jewish community. Rather, our central role remains to care for those in need and to strengthen the institutions where Jews live as Jews, including the family, school, Jewish Community Center, and synagogue. The North American Jewish community is exploding in creativity and vitality. It is also wonderfully anarchic; no single agency, no matter how powerful, can or ought seek to direct it. What

federation must do, in addition to providing essential infrastructure, is to identify goals, serve as a convener, become a valued resource, prod, goad, and provide essential resources for the community-building we now require.

If we can achieve these things, and I believe we can, we will make a powerful contribution not only to our Jewish future, but also to an America that does not know how to cope with its exaggerated material success and individualism. For our agenda of community and collective responsibility unmistakably goes against the grain of rampant individualism that appears to have no limits. Our agenda challenges us to keep in mind and heart our respon-

sibility toward those less fortunate and to nurture gratitude at a time when so many focus on what they do not have. This profound commitment both honors our tradition and renews it for ourselves and the broader cultures in which we live.

We are poised to respond to this extraordinary moment. We are prepared to devote our energies to the sacred agenda of ensuring and renewing our collective future and of making a new, abiding contribution to Western culture. At its best, our work here must and will make it possible for us to be, as we have been instructed to be, *or l'goyim*, "a light unto the nations."