

## Helping Others

---

Yecheil Bar-Chaim,

*JDC Country Director for Bosnia – Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovenia, The Czech Republic, Algeria and Tunisia.*

The story of Jews helping non-Jews begins, perhaps, with Joseph, who stored away tremendous quantities of wheat during the seven fat years, and then fed all of Egypt during the seven lean years. As the story is told in Genesis, the divine purpose of his work, of his being in Egypt at all, was ultimately to benefit the Jewish community—his father, his brothers, and their offspring. It is also worth remembering that for as long as the “non-sectarian” work of Joseph was remembered, Jews were safe in Egypt. Only when a later Pharaoh forgot Joseph were Jews enslaved.

The bulk of the work of the JOINT\* and its main focus -- is on strengthening Jewish communities from within—Jews working, living, praying, and studying with other Jews. But the JOINT also undertakes selected projects to improve the material well being of non-Jews. What is the connection? If our self-definition is to work with Jewish communities internally, how do we relate to this other area of activity? What is the place of our work in helping non-Jews?

My argument is that this non-sectarian work is a necessity, and it is a necessity **before** it becomes a virtue.

In order to understand just how essential such projects are, it is important to take a clear, realistic look at the Jews living in the countries in which I work: the Czech Republic and the former Yugoslavia. These are small Jewish populations. They are intermarried virtually one hundred percent. First the Nazis and then the Communists destroyed any basis for a self-contained religious community. When it comes to work, play, romance, politics - anything and everything that life consists of, these Jews live within the general society. They have studied in these surroundings; they think in the terms of the national myths and traditions of the people among whom they live; and they form an integral part of the general culture.

Some rabbis never forgave Napoleon for liberating the Jews. It is a fact, however, whether we like it or not, and we need to look at its consequences even now, 200 years down the line.

What has not changed in all these years -- and may be even more pronounced today -- is that Jews are still exceedingly visible. Everybody knows that they/we are there. In Macedonia, there are 200 Jews in a population of 2 million, but even so they are still in the public eye. Sometimes they are regarded out of respect; sometimes out of fear; sometimes out of mistrust; sometimes out of the notion that Jews are some kind of mythological creatures. We have all these ties to other people elsewhere in the world; we have these sources of information; we have this access to the center of power, or so they say at best. Perhaps anti-Semites do us a kind of back-handed favour in that people sometimes really believe the Protocols of Zion, not

necessarily the malevolent intent of Jews, but this tremendous power that they (we) allegedly have.

Under these circumstances, what would happen to these integrated, assimilated, yet visible, feared and respected Jewish communities if they stood aloof from their countries' problems? Did nothing for anyone outside of their own communities? What lessons would those societies draw about the Jews? What would that do to the place of Jews in their own societies?

Think about a soldier who receives a huge "CARE package" from home, with all kinds of food. It is inconceivable that he would not share it with his buddies. That is why everybody wants (expects) Jews to pay attention to the problems in the society around them.

The people who best understand this point are the Jewish communities themselves. The first impetus for the non-sectarian work that I have undertaken on behalf of the JOINT has been at the request of the local Jewish communities.

In October 1992, for example, the leaders from the Sarajevo Jewish Community came to meet a JOINT delegation in Zagreb. Six months after the war began in Bosnia-Herzegovina they set out the following picture:

*"We Jews are trusted in Sarajevo. We have our historical roots there. Everyone looks to us. We can be a vehicle for bringing in aid. This will be good for everyone, and will also protect us. But we don't have any resources. Will you bankroll us?"*

The JOINT agreed. Together we set up warehouses in Split, offered our services to a wide variety of donors of humanitarian aid, and began the extraordinary work of providing relief to a city under siege.

The same can be said for what is now called Serbia and Montenegro. Serbia is facing a new wave of anti-Semitism coming out of the various wars, the collapse of Communism, and the general instability. The leader of the Jewish Federation there is strong, but he does only what he wants to do. He is interested in taking care of the rights of survivors; so they are taken care of. He does not know what to do with the rabbi; so the rabbi manages on his own. Yet this man has embraced non-sectarian activities, wholeheartedly. So we regularly provide food and humanitarian supplies to assist refugee children from the Bosnian war, the war in Croatia, and the war in Kosovo.

The most recent example followed the floods in the Czech Republic. Tomas Jelinek, the young, dynamic President of the Prague Jewish Community, said to me:

*"Look, I don't know how to say this, but President Havel comes and visits the Jewish Cemetery where some trees have had to be uprooted, and the United States Ambassador comes to see us and organizes a gala concert for the Terezin Memorial (the museum complex memorializing the Theresienstadt concentration camp) to deal with the damages there, and all the Western newspapers are writing about us, and it puts us in a funny situation because our damages are actually relatively small."*

*We are not even in the area that was covered by the water. Our drains backed up and we had flooding in our basements. The rest of the public sees us getting all this attention and all this help, and they are really hurting. So we took money that we don't have and made a public donation to some schools in the Prague neighborhood of Karlin, which was covered by two meters of water. If you can, if you have access to this kind of support, please work with us to do the same thing."*

And so with the help of a large donation from the Weinberg Foundation of Baltimore and smaller donations from a number of different stateside Jewish federations, and with the guidance of the U.S. Ambassador and his staff, we undertook three non-sectarian projects for flood relief in the Czech Republic.

In Karlin, there is a complex of five schools, with a central dining hall. Six or seven hundred children would get lunch at this dining hall. After the floods it was completely out of commission. Repair was a priority. Families would not come back and live in the neighborhood or send their children to school if they could not eat. In the beginning of December 2002, the dining hall was reopened with our help and, in the spring, the kitchen will be re-equipped.

Also in this complex is a Special Education School, which serves developmentally disabled and intellectually under-stimulated children. About 80-90% of these children are Roma (Gypsies). The school belongs to the City of Prague, and not to the municipality or local ward. Given the other demands on the budget, no one was going to pay to repair that school.

Faced with this situation, I asked Dr. Alfred Bader of Milwaukee if he would give \$20,000, for which I promised to find matching funds, to make additional repairs on this school. He readily said yes, but what I had not counted on was what the Director of the School would be able to do with this promise. She took my offer, went to the City, and started pressing them: "I've got a donation \$20,000, if you can match it! Where are the matching funds? Give me the money. I have to get the school back in operation." Finally the city voted the entire \$200,000 that was needed to fix up the school. v

Dr. Bader's money will now go to repair the playground for this school. This whole area of 5,000 square meters has been contaminated by the floods.

Decontaminating the playground means removing all the topsoil, all the plants, and all the old dilapidated equipment, which should have been replaced long ago anyway. The entire area will be rebuilt, and in June this year, these developmentally disabled and intellectually deprived children will hold their masked Spring Carnival on this renewed playground.

The third flood relief project has a similar dynamic. Jan Munk, who is the President of the Jewish Federation in the Czech Republic and also the Director of the Terezin Memorial said to me:

*"We have tremendous losses at Terezin. There was a 14 km lake produced during the flood. But the Terezin Memorial will come through. The town of Terezin has nothing. Help me preserve our cooperation with the Town."*

So together with municipality we found a sheltered housing project, which happened to be in the

same facility where Danish Jews were interned during the war. The rebuilding of the housing unit is now going on as a three-way partnership between JDC, the Municipality, and the Preciosa Foundation (a Czech corporate foundation). At the end of this coming April, the Danish Jewish survivors will come to inaugurate the facility and dedicate a plaque there recounting the history of the site.

The lesson that I draw from this decade of involvement in combining non-sectarian work with what we do in the Jewish community is that only by helping others do we as Jews fully become citizens, with equal rights and privileges. It seems to me that this bringing together of concern for Jewish communities, on the one hand and helping non-Jews in need on the other, is like Joseph being reunited with his brothers. Of course, this is one of the most moving passages in the Bible one could ever hope to get close to, and I would like to imagine that we are doing just that.

Paris, February 2003

\* or JDC, The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee

*This article was adapted from a presentation given to the JDC Board of Director's Committee for International Development Projects*