

# Jewish Public Policy in the 21st Century: Finding Harmony Between the Universal and the Particular

*Rabbi Steve Gutow and Martin J. Raffel*

What is a “Jewish” issue in the public affairs arena? We who toil in the vineyard of Jewish community relations often encounter this query when addressing federation audiences accustomed to raising and disbursing funds to care for the social and economic welfare of Jews, whether in the United States, in Israel, or anywhere else in world. When it comes to advocating for a strong U.S.-Israel relationship, protecting Jews and Jewish institutions from anti-Semitism, securing the Jewish community’s share of government resources, and maintaining the wall of separation between religion and state, broad community support for our engagement is visceral and unequivocal.

But how broad is the support for our efforts to direct more and more government resources to all the poor in the United States, which, in this period of economic contraction, might be seen as diminishing the Jewish share of the pie? When we fight for increased foreign aid to sub-Saharan Africa, are we perceived as threatening Israel’s annual appropriation? When we encourage a generous immigration policy, especially for those seeking asylum, are we potentially constricting the number of slots available for Jews coming to the United States? If we devote ourselves to stopping the genocide in Darfur, are we using limited time and energy that instead could be channeled to counter direct threats against Israel from Teheran, other radical regimes, and terrorist groups?

The question of how Jews should participate in the public square—whether to focus on issues that are particular to our community or on issues of a more universal nature—has been central on our agenda since the Emancipation or *haskalah* in the 19th century in Western Europe. In this article we want to make the case not for choosing one or the other, but for the necessity of doing both. Our great sage Hillel asserted, “If I am not for myself, who am I, but if I am only for myself, what am I?” In fact, not only is this “advice” profoundly anchored in our Jewish traditions and values but it also reflects a pragmatic recognition of the realities of life for minority Jewish communities living within larger non-Jewish societies.

In this country, the Jewish population is declining both in absolute numbers and, more clearly, as a percentage of the American population. According to estimates from the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute in Jerusalem and from the U.S. Census Bureau, the 2008 American Jewish population numbers 5,275,000 Jews, out of 305 million Americans, or 1.73%; by 2020, there will be 5,200,000 Jews in a population of 342 million Americans, or 1.52%. In addition

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to our declining numbers in a rapidly growing America, many Jews, particularly the younger generation, are distancing themselves from federations and other established organizations and searching for connections that allow them to be integrated into the whole of America.

Israel and the Jewish community do confront enormous external and internal challenges. Yet, this is not a time for circling the wagons. It is a time for our community to engage actively on an array of issues affecting not just Jews but all of humanity.

### **NEW MODELS OF ENGAGEMENT**

If we fail to search out new models of engagement, our political influence in this country will erode. Without allies, we who represent less than 2% of the population will have a hard time winning many of the battles that are particular to our community, such as the security of Israel. Just as alarming, the federation system, which has meant so much to the well-being of this community, risks losing a dynamic infusion of newer and younger energy if we do not engage with it.

In response to this challenge, the government relations effort of UJA-Federation of New York has been both universal and particular in its approach. Over the past decade it has been active on issues such as Darfur, immigration, slave labor, and advocating for universal prekindergarten services, income supports, and affordable housing. It has also built strong coalitions with new immigrant groups, Catholic Charities, Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies, United Way, and myriad issue-oriented associations.

One particular arena in which the community can and should dramatically expand its work is in responding to poverty in America. Of course, we care about our own, and we need to do so. Yet, when every Yom Kippur, we read in Isaiah that we fast “to let the oppressed go free, to break off every yoke, . . .to share your bread with the hungry and to take the wretched poor into your home,” most Jews do not interpret that verse as a call to worry about only the Jewish poor. The concern for the poor and downtrodden is embedded deeply within our Jewish DNA. Some in our community may look to government as the primary address to combat poverty, whereas others prefer nongovernmental approaches. The challenge is to keep the varied strains of the community working together toward the same overall goal of social and economic justice. There is an old Hasidic saying: “Let us be like the lines that lead to the center of a circle—uniting there, and not like parallel lines, which never join.”

Because it understood the need to ensure that those who are poor and near-poor attain self-sufficiency, UJA-Federation has increased its core operating grant to the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty from \$218,000 in 2000 to \$2,012,000 in 2009. UJA-Federation also has been active in the broader community, supporting initiatives that benefit Jews and non-Jews, including playing a pivotal role in the passage of the earned income tax credit legislation. Sometimes, all we need do is provide a broader context for the work that we do on behalf of Israel and the Jewish people. We ought to move away from emphasizing just the Jewish beneficiaries of our efforts, including when we obtain government support, and toward expressing their more universal impact. For the past three years, UJA-Federation has helped its agencies access \$40 million per year

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for programs serving both the Jewish and broader communities through federal, state, and local budgets.

Rather than framing this effort as one done solely to obtain dollars for Jewish recipients, why not add that the same legislation offers critical assistance to the poor of all religions and ethnicities? When we speak about the annual foreign aid bill, which is very important for Israel and on which the community expends a great amount of advocacy resources and political capital, why limit the public discussion to Israel's security alone? We should also stress the billions of dollars that go to support African, Latin American, and Asian nations as well.

When John Ruskay ten years ago spoke about the basic mission of federation, he emphasized the need to make "our communities and traditions a source of enduring meaning and purpose that can serve as an antidote to the frenetic quality of modern life." He understood that Jews were worried about more than the size of their bank accounts or the quality of their vacations, and while being supportive of a robust government relations department, he has continued to use his organizational pulpit to make this point throughout his tenure at UJA-Federation.

If our community is to continue to thrive and to reflect the essential ethos and purpose of our people, it needs to speak, both in word and deed, to the hearts of Jews looking for enduring meaning through an authentically Jewish engagement with the greater world. When the federation system helps to get Jews engaged in Iranian human rights or Darfur rallies, or programming relating to the environment and a variety of other public concerns, it provides members of our community with an antidote to the otherwise narcissistic quality of modern American life.

In addition to being firmly rooted in our values and attractive to many young Jews, activism on a universal agenda creates opportunities for developing close relationships with key non-Jewish actors, which often become extremely helpful in advancing our more particular policy objectives. For example, African American members of Congress have been consistently responsive to the Jewish community's pleas to support the foreign aid bill—no doubt in part because they understand the value of Israel to the United States. At the same time, they recognize the important role the Jewish community played historically in the civil rights movement and the role we continue to play today advocating on matters crucial to the well-being of their community.

Many organizations, including our own, nationally, and community relations committees locally, in fact embrace a more expansive view of Jewish engagement in the public square. Federations, no doubt, will continue to be the principal address for meeting specific Jewish needs. Both the universal and particular are essential if we are to build a community of purpose and meaning.

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