

The Questions That Challenge Us and the Community That Binds Us: The JCC in Manhattan and UJA-Federation

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Twenty years ago, a small group of dreamers imagined a vision of community that would inspire deeper connections to Jewish life and Jewish values while celebrating the diversity and creativity of New York Jewry. Thus was the JCC in Manhattan (then known as the JCC on the Upper West Side) born. Ten years later, in 1999, John Ruskay articulated a vision for Jewish community as he became the new executive vice president and CEO of UJA-Federation of New York (see the Appendix). What is interesting to observe is how similar these visions were. Ruskay asked some challenging questions within his inaugural address, questions that have engaged the founders, leaders, and staff of the JCC in Manhattan from its inception. In this article, I share some of his questions and the ways they have played out in the day-to-day life of what has become a thriving center of Jewish life in Manhattan.

“How can we create caring communities, communities whose members at the most elemental human level reach out to one another in times of joy and in times of sorrow and are there for each other in the most fundamental human ways?”

“Mommy, what does poverty mean?” A 6-year-old girl, just learning how to read, was sounding out the title of a photographic exhibit in our lobby that featured the work of the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty. The photographs, taken by a former member of our board, herself an accomplished photographer and teacher in our digital photography department, powerfully portrayed the impact that Met Council has had on the lives of the Jewish poor. “Well,” her mother hesitated, “It means people who don’t have enough money for food and rent and clothes.” I had been rushing to my office but wanted to hear the rest of this conversation, so I tried to look inconspicuous, flipping through a program guide at the box office. The child continued. “Do we know anyone who is poor?” While the mother was struggling to answer her, the child began naming what I assumed to be all her friends, her relatives, and even her teacher. One by one, her mother assured her that none of those people were poor. Finally, the girl looked up at her mother and said, with the innocence of a 6-year-old, “How can we help the people in the photographs get more money?”

A young man came to our human resources director to apply for a job. Unshaven and wearing shorts, he did not make eye contact with her and seemed uninterested in working at the JCC. He was not hired. Several months later, a

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new program was proposed to me to help young adults with social challenges who were struggling to create meaningful lives for themselves. As I listened to this passionate mother describe her own efforts to find a place in the Jewish community for her grown son, I realized that it was he whom we had turned away when he came looking for a job. Unaware of his challenges and frankly ill equipped to look for the treasures that lay below the surface, we had inadvertently joined the rest of the world in failing this young man. Out of this meeting and our very difficult but honest exchange was born Adaptations, a program now in its fourth year, which helps hundreds of young adults thrive within the context of a supportive and welcoming community. Adaptations works with every part of the JCC—the fitness center and the culinary center, Jewish learning, and creative arts, just to name a few areas—to provide programs that encourage young adults with challenges to grow and learn and connect to one another and to the larger community. Fully aware that we need the services of a larger network of agencies to fully actualize our dreams for Adaptations, the JCC partners with F.E.G.S., the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services (JBFCS), the Seaver Center at Mt. Sinai, and Job Path. But the JCC's core mission—to build and foster community and to lay down pathways into Jewish life—was best articulated recently by an Adaptations member: “Before Adaptations, I had nothing to do. Now I have friends, a social life, some place to go, some place to grow.”

When JBFCS approached us a few years ago with the idea of placing a therapist at the JCC, I was skeptical. Their theory was that Upper West Side residents who needed help would appreciate a local therapist working within a vibrant, life-affirming institution. I was not so sure.

First of all, we had very little space and therapists need private offices. But more to the point, I wondered who would see a therapist at the JCC. Who would seek help in such a public space, however private the office might be? What would make our “brand” lead people to believe that such help would be available and that it would be of the quality they might find among private therapists?

Our staff, determined to make this happen, found a closet on one of the lower floors and cajoled our facilities staff to convert it into an office. A few months later, the social worker from JBFCS was so busy with clients that the agency needed to assign another therapist to the JCC.

“How can we strengthen the sense of Jewish peoplehood, *klal yisrael*, across geographic boundaries, at a time when Jewish life is not physically threatened? Or, said differently, what can now provide the glue for Jewish solidarity so we can reverse the growing divides among our people?”

Beginning in 1997, each summer, members of the JCC Executive Committee have attended a week-long program of Jewish learning at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. This experience was inspired by one of our board members who had spent a year with his family in Israel. In addition to the many extraordinary ways in which the experience of studying Jewish texts together in Jerusalem deepened people's connection to Judaism and the richness of its tradition, those week-long seminars solidified our leaders' commitment to the place of Israel in the mission of the JCC.

When a new generation of leaders emerged, it became apparent that this particular experience would not work for them. For one thing, they had very young children and were unwilling to leave them at home for a week in the summer. Some were at the beginning of their Jewish journey, and study was not their doorway into Jewish life. One day a board member, who would soon become the president of the JCC, proposed a wild idea. “How about,” she said, “we create a day camp in Jerusalem?” At the time, we were working closely with a small, emerging JCC on the “Upper West Side” of Jerusalem, in the German Colony. A small grant from UJA-Federation enabled us to bring together our leadership, both lay and staff, and we were beginning to dream up joint projects.

A year later, 25 children who did not speak one another’s language attended a day camp in Jerusalem together, because it turns out playing and splashing in the water form a universal language. As their parents, both American (some of whom had never been to Israel) and Israeli (some of whom had never engaged meaningfully with American Jews) explored the city and formed bonds with one another, these new JCC leaders created their own new way to connect to Israel. Through the eyes and hearts of their children, they have formed connections to families very different from their own and very much the same.

In 2003 we traveled to Moscow to attend a conference of JCCs throughout the world. Most amazing were the 160 JCCs in the former Soviet Union that have been created since 1989. We were then at the beginning stages of imagining a program for young Russians at the JCC, a program that would eventually reach out in important ways to this growing sophisticated but Jewishly unaware population.

A mutual friend who did work in the FSU had asked us to contact Misha Goldenberg, the executive director of the JCC in Nikolayev. Not to worry—Misha found us, and very quickly, we formed a deep and lasting bond between our two JCCs. Each year, we ask parents to add something extra to their camp fees to help Misha grow his family camp; each year our parents have responded generously. We exchange art projects and t-shirts, and although our kids keep referring to the town as “Nickelodeon,” we believe that the value of feeling connected to Jews halfway across the world who swim (albeit in the Black Sea, not the Pearl River pool), play soccer, and sing Jewish songs with *ruach* (spirit) somehow permeates their young minds and hearts. It certainly has permeated ours. And if we can swing it, after a week in Israel, wouldn’t it be terrific if our Jerusalem day camp traveled to Nikolayev for another week?

“How can we strengthen and renew Jewish life, making our communities and traditions a source of enduring meaning and purpose that can serve as an antidote to the frenetic quality of modern life?”

Like many JCCs across the country, even before our building was completed in 2002, we were asking ourselves what it would look like on Shabbat. Although some JCCs close on Shabbat and others are open, we were interested in a deeper question: How can we engage a pluralistic Jewish community, some of whom see this day as Shabbos, others as Shabbat, and still others as Saturday? Opening the JCC without a consciousness of the specialness of the day, simply treating it as another day in the week, would miss an opportunity to live out our mission to lay down pathways into Jewish life in diverse ways. The same would be true if

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the JCC were closed on Shabbat. We have never been an institution that says there is only one way to be Jewish.

At first, we decided to open the building at 1:00 pm, conveying to the synagogue community that we were not interested in “competing” with them. We would open the fitness center in the afternoon but do no programming except Jewish learning and Shabbat meals. When we realized that this magnificent facility would be closed in the morning, we reached out to organizational partners serving black and Hispanic children and invited them to use the building. For the last eight years, hundreds of underserved children have come each Saturday morning to swim, play basketball, use the darkroom, and make the JCC their home away from home. We have created meaningful relationships with these fellow community members.

But after years of avoiding programming in the afternoon, we began to feel that we were missing an opportunity to reach a significant part of the community. Many people were going to the movies, shopping, doing errands, and looking for ways to entertain their children on Saturday afternoons. In an important conversation with the JCC Board, Rabbi Irwin Kula challenged us to develop our own JCC *halakha*, a way of thinking about Shabbat that would articulate and expand our mission. Following conversations with staff, lay leaders, and members, two principles emerged. First, there would be no commercial transactions on Shabbat. Whatever we were going to create, it would have to be free and open to anyone who walked through the doors. We were making a statement: Shabbat is free at the JCC, a gift to all of us in today’s harried, fast-paced world. Second, we were determined that the building look, feel, and act differently than it did during the rest of the week.

R & R: Shabbat at the JCC has become a signature experience at the JCC, funded by donors who believe in the idea that everyone should be welcome, regardless of their ability to pay for programs. On every Shabbat between Sukkot and Pesach, some 500 to 600 people come to do yoga, listen to stories, watch films, hear music, study Torah, enjoy a *cappella* singing in the lobby, meditate, discuss Hebrew literature, and hang out. The programming is sensitive to the most observant members of our community, while at the same recognizing that we hold different views of how to celebrate the day. When we ask people what they like best about R & R, they tell us that it is often less about the programs than simply hanging out at the JCC on Shabbat, Shabbos, Saturday, whatever.

We continue to be challenged by the questions Ruskay asked ten years ago, and we continue to be engaged with the network of agencies that form the core of our community as we move forward. This process is not always simple. When the JCC was being imagined in the late 1980s, we were all in a somewhat different place. Many of our early supporters were new to Jewish communal life, and some had little or no relationship to UJA-Federation. Others viewed the federation as the “Establishment,” an East Side institution that had little in common with the new and creative vision for a pluralistic, Jewish center on the West Side. In turn, not everyone in UJA-Federation understood the need for the JCC of Manhattan 25 years ago when the West Side was just becoming revitalized and many were unsure of its direction. Few people envisioned today’s vibrant community with 17 synagogues, four day schools, many kosher restaurants, several

Jewish agencies, and a JCC that welcomes 2,500 people into its building each day, serving a population of perhaps 100,000 Jews.

And to be sure, even the early dreamers could not have imagined all that has unfolded since the JCC was created. This enlarged vision—a vision that explores issues of Jewish poverty in the lobby and reaches out to special needs children and adults; a vision that stretches across oceans and continents to our homeland and beyond; a vision that understands the yearning for Jewish tradition and values, appreciates the diversity of our community, and celebrates it in all its varied shapes and colors—parallels the work of UJA-Federation and is nurtured by it. Many of the programs described in this article were funded in part through the various commissions at UJA-Federation.

But the relationship far transcends financial support even if the cultural divide has not been entirely erased. On our worst days, the divide feels like an ocean. We want things to move faster and deeper; we want to be even riskier. We feel underserved and undervalued as an institution that brings thousands of Jews into Jewish life. We know that UJA-Federation also feels frustrated, noting the startling difference in gifts to the annual campaign between residents of the East and West Sides of Manhattan. We realize that we have not fully conveyed the deeply important work that UJA-Federation does both here in the city and abroad. We need to continue to develop new strategies that will resonate, particularly for newer, younger prospective donors.

But on our best days, we are joined by a common vision and a shared responsibility. And we believe that we are continuing to answer the deepest of Ruskay's hopes of a decade ago: "If the communities we create are truly inspired, as they can be if we so will it, as they must be if we are serious, they will in turn inspire those who stand at the crossroads to join us in this ancient and timeless adventure."

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