

## Meetings and Sports Clubs: the Practicalities of History

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When you think of Jewish involvement in civil rights struggles of the 1960s, what activities do you picture? Freedom Rides? Brave marches through Southern cities, as Jews join hands with African-American marchers, all raising voices in song?

Or do you picture JCC board meetings?

Grand events of history are connected to a web of smaller, mundane events which are, in a way, just as important. Glimpses of these more obscure corners of history can be fascinating. Take [this 1965 article from the Journal of Jewish Communal Service](#), for example.

The story begins when a St. Louis JCC hosted "a forum program dealing with the Negro revolution." Ten couples among the center membership "formed a group to deepen their understanding of of the civil rights movement," and "began to meet on a regular basis, invited Negro speakers..., visited Negro neighborhoods... and made a very conscious effort to identify with the problems of the Negro community."

In spring 1964, the group decided the center needed to make a practical commitment to civil rights, and by summer a committee on the center's board responded by drafting a resolution mandating that the center adhere to four points:

1. "Intensify efforts to do all that is within our power to secure immediate justice and full citizenship rights for all Americans everywhere;"
2. "Support human rights legislation on national, state and local levels..."
3. "Deal only with business firms which follow a policy of non-discrimination in employment"
4. "Schedule meetings, luncheons and dinners only in places which do not discriminate against anyone because of race or creed."

Tellingly, the vote on the resolution was pushed off until autumn, hoping that by then Congress would have passed civil rights legislation that made the resolution "less controversial". Still, when the vote came in September 1964, it passed by an "overwhelming vote."

As simple as it was to put a resolution on paper, it became apparent only a few weeks later that the center would have to put its money - actually, its popular programming - where its mouth was. The center realized that its athletic teams would be henceforth unable to participate in an intra-city athletic league, because some other teams (who would host matches) were private (i.e. whites-only) clubs.

Members of the athletic team protested that they should be allowed to participate anyway. Some argued that the resolution did not cover this particular case. Others argued that their participation might allow them to build relationships with members of discriminatory clubs, and that perhaps this might lead to those clubs reconsidering their policies in the future.

Meetings of the board's physical education committee, and the following meeting of the entire board, became "provocative" and "soul-searching". Eventually, the leadership agreed that "the resolution definitely precluded participation in the League."

The agreement was not unanimous. "It was quite apparent that the board of directors was not at all unified in its reactions to the situation. Several who were members of one of the private clubs under discussion were actually quite conflicted." Over the following year, further meetings saw discussion of the center's principles and actions regarding involvement in the civil rights struggle.

After a year of consideration, however, staff felt "a certain mandate from the board in making the Resolution on Equal Opportunities a viable program tool. Membership on all levels has been helped to examine the stake they have as Jews in the Negro struggle for civil rights. The actions of the board have given a forward thrust to the implementation of the citizenship objectives of the Center... the esprit de corps of the board is at an all time high and people expressed the feeling that the past year's board activity was most meaningful."

It is refreshing to read such a recognizable picture of a Jewish community situating itself relative to an important social movement. The picture that emerges from this account is not a heroic profile of perfect commitment and courage from the very beginning (a la Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel), but rather a very human picture, in which the stakeholders of this JCC hold a spectrum of opinions and a spectrum of levels of commitment to the principle of justice for all. It is a story of learning and growing, a story of non-instant change.

Reading this account might provoke a 2010 Jewish reader to feel shame that the small change in question took so much time and struggle. Or inspired, because ten couples who got together were able to initiate a process that led to a major policy shift in a noteworthy local institution. Or inspired because the mundane actions of the type we engage in every day -- board meetings, amateur sports leagues, conversations with others in our community -- are real parts of the larger drama of history.