

# Building Progressive Jewish Community in Israel: The Leo Baeck Education Center

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The popular wisdom is that the Conservative and the Reform or Progressive (the terms are used interchangeably in Israel) movements in Israel have had a miniscule impact on Israel's non-Orthodox population. Indeed, less than 1% of Israeli Jews see themselves as belonging to those movements (Tabory, 2004). Thus, if one defines Reform identification according to the North American model as affiliation with a synagogue of the Reform movement, then, yes, Reform Judaism has failed to have a measurable impact in Israel.

However, the experience of the Leo Baeck (LB) Education Center and Community Center in Haifa, Israel, which recently celebrated its 70th anniversary, raises the question of how to define Reform identification and belonging in Israel. Through a different route from synagogue affiliation, it has become a highly influential organization in all areas of Israeli society. It has educated generations of Jews whose identity is embedded in Reform Jewish ideology often without their realizing it. Thus, its impact on a progressive Israel and on developing leaders and members of the Reform movement in Israel is much greater than is generally believed.

Since it was founded in 1938 by Rabbi Dr. Meir Elk as a kindergarten for 30 children of central European immigrants, the LB Education Center and Community Center has become one of the most influential community and educational institutions in Israel. Based on the integration of formal and informal education and on a humanistic, pluralistic, egalitarian, and social justice philosophy, today it is one of Israel's premier institutions of learning and of community outreach. It serves immigrants from many countries around the world, including the former Soviet Union, Ethiopia, and South and North America; Israeli-born citizens regardless of their ethnic or religious denomination (Oriental, Sephardic, and Ashkenazi Jews, Christians, Moslems, or Druze); and citizens with various sexual preferences (heterosexual, gays, lesbians, and transsexuals)—all the while promoting ethical leadership and environmental responsibility.

The converted apartment house that housed the small school in the 1960s would not have enabled the LB Education Center to meet the needs of the many Sephardic children who entered secondary school at that time. Rabbi Bob Samuels, who joined Dr. Elk in 1962 and later became Leo Baeck's second headmaster, developed the conception of a large campus housing both a school and a community center. He raised the funds for this new campus, which was built in stages on the Carmel mountain overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. The school moved into this new campus in 1970.

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The Ohel Abraham Progressive Synagogue was built on the campus in 1978 and has been active since, bringing worshipers together every Shabbat and holiday. In that same year, the LB Community Center was founded, and in 1994 it took the strategic step of joining the Israel Association of Community Centers; today it is a model *Matnas* (the name for a community center in Israel).

Three of the first four directors of the LB Community Center are graduates of the School of Jewish Communal Service (SJCS; Yitzhak Cohen, MJCS '82; Javier Simonovich GWB-MJCS, '85; and Uri Marcus MJCS '88). They have combined Jewish progressive values with strong community professional skills acquired at SJCS and created a new model of community work in Israel.

The traditional dichotomy in Israeli society between secular and religious Jews has been created in part by the provision of religious services by government agencies such as the Israel Rabbinate and the Ministry of Religion, whereas services to the secular population are provided by either national or municipal agencies such as the Ministry of Welfare, Municipal Community Centers, or the Israel Association of Community Centers (*Hachevra LaMatnassim*). The LB Community Center developed a completely different model in terms of values pursued and the quality and quantity of services delivered. The most important innovation has been its combination of social secular values and progressive Jewish values as its staff work with the varied populations of different socioeconomic levels living near the main campus. New immigrants have been enabled to start their journey toward an Israeli identity. At the same time, Israeli-born citizens have found a wide range of recreational, social, religious, and sports activities embedded in a progressive Jewish culture. Arabs and other non-Jewish citizens enjoy community life in a nondiscriminatory environment as they participate in sports and cultural programs as well as mutual understanding encounters between Jews and non-Jews. Gays, lesbians, and transsexuals have found a respectful community environment open to their social activities. Finally, disabled populations have discovered the meaning of "different but equal" at the LB Community Center.

Today, after thirty years of continuous and expanding community work the time has come to learn from this rich experience and to make it a model for other progressive communities in Israel, North America, and the rest of the Jewish world.

### **A PROGRESSIVE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN ISRAEL**

In addition to the informal education provided by the Community Center, the LB Education Center spans a complete formal education continuum that includes the preschool and kindergarten (185 children aged 6 months to 6 years); the progressive Jewish elementary school (200 pupils); the junior high school (1,000 pupils); the high school (1,000 pupils), one of the top-ranked high schools in the country; and for the last three years, a joint venture of the WIZO-Leo Baeck High School for Art & Design located in a campus in the Upper Hadar neighborhood (350 pupils). In addition, the Lokey Academy of Jewish Studies reaches thousands of pupils and adults through seminars on Jewish identity and knowledge, as well as innovative courses in Judaism for Progressive Jews from the Diaspora. The main campus also houses the Allan Offman Sport Center.

From this main campus are launched a variety of social outreach programs through a wide network of satellite branches throughout Haifa: the Beit Yitzhak

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Early Childhood Educational, Developmental & Parenting Center in the Kiryat Sprinzak neighborhood serving Ethiopian immigrants and native Israeli families in distress; the Beit HaKehilla serving the Ethiopian community of western Haifa; the Ruth Center for youth at risk in Kiryat Sprinzak; the Arab-Jewish Clore Neighborhood Community Center in the Ein Ha'Yam neighborhood; the Early Childhood Learning Center for Arab Children at risk; the After School Care & Learning Centers for Arab and Jewish children at risk; and the Beit-El center for the elderly in the Hatisbe neighborhood. Some of the most noteworthy programs are the special needs programs and activities for children and adults, the 25-year-old Arab-Jewish Summer Camp, and the multicultural holiday celebrations for Muslims, Christians, and Jews.

The progressive Jewish philosophy, ideology, and way of life are embedded in all programs developed by the LB Education Center. The Ohel Avraham Progressive Synagogue and the Lokey International Academy for Jewish Studies have developed innovative curricula of Judaic studies for all ages. Communal and educational life at the main campus is enhanced by the Hugo Gryn Outdoor Synagogue & Gardens, which creates a natural environment for the community's spiritual life.

### **VALUES, MISSION, AND VISION**

The LB Education Center and Community Center strive to weave together education and community work, based on humanistic learning, democracy, and Jewish values. They are committed to *tikkun olam* (repair of the world), social justice, mutual help, and equal opportunities for all. Because Haifa has a large population of Israeli Arabs, tolerance and dialogue must be central between different ethnic and religious groups living together. The mission statement reads, "The range of different groups in the community meet together, organize qualitative activities according to each group's needs, caring for their environment; and, creating interconnection, dialogue and acceptance of all. The Community Center will help all groups in the community to identify their own needs, encourage participation, activism and independence."

The Community Center is run by a board staffed by the CEO and made up of lay leaders elected every four years among thousands of community members in an open, democratic community election. Every adult who is served by or participates in any of the many programs of the Community Center has the right to vote. In addition to these elected volunteers, delegates of the Haifa Municipality, the Israel Association of Community Centers, and citizen representatives of nearby neighborhood committees sit on the board. The result is a pluralistic and democratic Jewish community institution in Israel's fragmented society.

### **HOW THE COMMUNITY CENTER IS UNIQUE**

In Israel many social institutions serve community needs. The Ministry of Education is responsible for formal education, the Ministry of Welfare is in charge of social services and special populations, and the Orthodox establishment, in different ways, provides religious services and guidance to the Jewish population. The Israel Association of Community Centers provides community services to more than 200 communities in Israel. It works as a branch of the Ministry of Education in conjunction with municipal authorities in each town or village.

Historically community work started before the creation of the State of Israel and developed with it. Community work spans a continuum from state-initiated and supported programs to nongovernmental community work and social action approaches (Korazim, 2000).

North American JCCs, the Israeli *Matnas* model, and the LB Community Center are all geared to meeting local community needs, and all try to minimize conflict through consensus (Cohen, 1982). However, there the similarities end. Whereas the JCCs and the *Matnas* are unaffiliated with any religious denomination and are nonideological in nature, the LB Community Center is strongly identified with and is part of Progressive Judaism in Israel. JCCs function on a voluntary and independent basis, whereas the *Matnas* is part of the local government; in contrast, the LB Community Center is a private institution that cooperates with local and national authorities. JCCs espouse social work principles and values, and the *Matnas* is primarily based on the educational model; the Community Center is inspired by both models and implements elements of both. In terms of funding, the LB Community Center is more similar to JCCs than to the *Matnas*, which is primarily funded by local and national government subventions. Both the JCCs and the LB Community Center receive a large part of their budgets from membership dues. Board membership differs as well. JCC board members must belong to their Centers, whereas the *Matnas* board includes representatives of many governmental and other agencies. The board at the Community Center is made up of members and professional representatives of the overall board of the Leo Baeck Education Center.

Another way of understanding how the LB Education Center and its Community Center function as an independent, private nongovernmental organization is to analyze them along the five dimensions proposed by Korazim (2000):

1. The locus of initiation of program: The Community Center develops its own programs according to Progressive Jewish values and perspectives. No municipal or governmental department has initiated any of the hundreds of programs developed by the Center. On the contrary, many community programs initiated by the Center, after proven successful, were then made part of the Social Services Department of the Haifa Municipality.
2. Private funding for community workers' salaries and projects: The loyalty of the community workers to the organization and its goals has prevailed over varying and often inappropriate political interests. The salary scale is slightly higher as well. The possibility of obtaining project funding from various sources in Israel and abroad allows for a special independence of action but puts much pressure on the institution's fundraisers.
3. Independence and freedom from external pressures: This allows the Community Center to formulate and establish its own goals and practice, being proactive and an innovator of projects and development.
4. Level of complexity: This is only possible without governmental interventions and boundaries, allowing the Community Center to respond rapidly to community change.
5. Major modes of intervention: The Community Center has fostered various modes of community intervention at all levels in a creative, progressively Jewish professional perspective; for example, community conflict resolution methods, collective action, public campaigns, and mass media use.

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Community consensus and cooperation with the local population have been pursued since the first community outreach programs were held in 1985 and again in 1988; in these programs, hundreds of high-school students went on door-to-door campaigns to obtain volunteers for more than 40 carefully crafted committees, projects, and programs offered by the Community Center. In 1988 more than 1,000 volunteers were recruited in this way.

The Community Center is an engine of social change. It has created social action programs and services, often in cooperation with the local municipal authorities, but sometimes without any such help. The Center opened a youth club for disadvantaged youth and children in the Kiryat Sprinzak neighborhood in 1987 that continues to take kids off the streets. During the huge wave of immigration from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s a supermarket for the new *Olim* was opened at the main campus building, selling products at cost and saving them up to 50% on basic food stuffs. Groups of physically and mentally disabled individuals have found a base at the Community Center for meeting together and planning how to go to the authorities to claim their social and civil rights.

The strategies of community change that the Community Center has used since its inception are still very much a part of its current work (Checkoway, 1990). First, it uses mass mobilization of citizens, students, and other groups to demonstrate in favor of a cause or against an unwanted social situation. Departments of the Education Center and specifically of the Community Center have launched demonstrations against religious coercion in Rabin Square in Tel Aviv, in recognition of Ethiopian immigrants' Jewishness in front of the Knesset in Jerusalem, and in favor of transforming a municipal abandoned building in the Ein Ha'Yam Arab-Jewish neighborhood in Haifa into a coexistence Community Center. Second, the citizen participation strategy assumes that community members can take responsibility for themselves by participating in policymaking decisions and program implementation. Community democratization has been developed through the years, not only through the popularly elected Board of Volunteers but also through many committees on such issues as helping new immigrant students adapt to Israel by being adopted by Israeli families or the publication of the community newspaper *From Heart to Heart (M'Lev el Lev)*, which is fully edited and run by volunteers. Third, together with the international movement of Progressive Judaism, the Center teaches new immigrants from the former Soviet Union and from Ethiopia their rights and how to maneuver through the often difficult Israeli bureaucracy. A Russian-speaking lawyer has given hundreds of lectures to groups of Russian immigrants and provided personal counseling on how to negotiate and get what they deserve. Courses for the empowerment of community activists and the creation of community capital through social action are offered by the Community Center. Groups of adults from the Ohel Abraham synagogue meet weekly to learn Bible and Talmud, to study ancient and modern texts, and prepare for the Jewish holidays.

In addition, the Community Center develops services that are not provided by the government or are provided on a limited basis. For example, it offers workshops where low-income senior citizens come to work and engage in social interaction as well as afternoon enrichment programs for Ethiopian preschool children and their parents where the children can develop and the mothers learn parenting skills. It developed a branch in the Ein Ha'Yam neighborhood where

there were no municipal community services at all for the mixed Jewish, Arab, and new immigrant population.

### CONCLUSIONS

The Community Center at the Leo Baeck Education Center has left its imprint on Haifa for the last 30 years as part of an education process that the Education Center has been pursuing for more than 70 years. It is unique in that it sees the whole community as its responsibility: those who want to come into the Center for their own enrichment, those who need help in their neighborhood, and those throughout the city who are rejected by others. It is deeply committed to Progressive Jewish values and principles, fulfilling them every day in each program and activity. This practical Judaism is a way of life. The fact that its programs are initiated by a Progressive Judaism organization is seen as a guarantee of good quality service. The Community Center, as part of a peculiar organization that fits no other model in Haifa or in Israel, should not only be studied in depth but reproduced in other cities and locations as a way of bringing Progressive Judaism to the masses in Israel.

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