

The past 50 years have witnessed enormous changes in Diaspora communities: relocation, fragility, renaissance, and a consolidation of communities in fewer metropolitan areas. What is the long-term impact of these sometimes phoenix-like, and other times ruinous, changes? While so much of the world is expanding, the Jewish world is contracting. How will this affect our place in the world? In the following pages, we hear from not necessarily representative communities about resurgent antisemitism, the economics of self-sufficiency, the significance of cultural heritage and its transmission, and the impact on communities when the young emigrate.

Heed the Words: Next Year in Jerusalem

Shimon Felix

L'shana ha'ba-ah b'Yerushalayim." "Next year in Jerusalem." At Passover *sedarim* the world over, the Jewish people optimistically look forward to leaving their homes and celebrating next Passover in Jerusalem, fulfilling the ancient dream of being a free people in their own land. Since the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, if not even earlier, it is hard to contemplate this practice with anything but a jaundiced eye. If you want it so much, why don't you — as they say — 'just do it?' The trip is not that long nor very expensive; millions of Jews already live in Israel; what's holding you back?

The answers to this question are many. I would like to focus on one of them by taking another look at our opening phrase, "next year in Jerusalem."

For 2,000 years, Jews have understood Jerusalem, and Israel, as being about the future, about next year. On a simple level, this reflects the fact that, when we said "next year in Jerusalem," we were not there but were looking forward to a time when we would be.

On a deeper level, this phrase expresses a specific role that Jerusalem plays in Jewish life and thought, a certain quality that Jerusalem has come to embody. The

Diaspora, traditionally understood as dysfunctional at best and dangerous at worst, was not where our destiny was to be played out. Jerusalem came to stand for our commitment to thinking about the future of the Jewish people.

As the years went by, however, "next year in Jerusalem" ceased to refer to next year, or, actually, to any year at all. With the passage of time, Jewish communities, and the collective Jewish psyche, became more and

more rooted in the on-going Diaspora present, which contained within it the only real future imaginable, as well as the only past that the Jews in exile actually remembered. The older, Jerusalem-based past had long been relegated to the realm of half-forgotten, half-imagined myth.

And so, Diaspora Jews lived in a time warp. Their real past — the synagogue in which their parents prayed and the cemeteries in which they were buried,

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the venerable communal institutions to which they affiliated — was rooted in their relatively recent exilic experience. Their present and future — the future they could actually plan for and work toward — were there in exile as well, static, without any hope of radical change or transformation, only of survival and incremental improvement. In addition to this unpromising continuum, there existed another chronology, an almost mythical past and future, located far away, in a hazy, other-worldly landscape, with deserts and palm trees, populated by Canaanites, Babylonians, Macabees, prophets, Romans, and Ishmaelites — a past that one could study and dream about, but not visit, and a future so unreal that it was almost beyond imagining. And so, “next year in Jerusalem” became a myth, rather than a plan, a fantasy about a mythical future in a mythical city, unconnected in any way to a real, tangible commitment to the future of the Jewish people.

When, miraculously, the Jewish people began, in very small numbers, to view “next year” as next year and “Jerusalem” as a place one could actually go to — and rejected the Diaspora in order to embrace the dream of Jerusalem as a reality — it was an expression of a radical shift in the way these Jews understood the future, as well as the past and present. The Zionist movement was an attempt to refocus the Jewish gaze. It attempted to wrench that gaze from the very real and very unpromising past, present, and future of exile, as well as from the starry-eyed, dream-like vision of “Jerusalem,” and refocus it firmly on a future that held within it the possibility of radical change and transformation. Eschewing both the Diaspora’s inexorable demands of continuity and preservation as well as the beautifully undemanding dream of a heavenly city, the early Zionists insisted that the imagined future of the past

2,000 years be returned to the realm of the real.

But, tragically, many Diaspora Jews did not see it this way. Held hostage to once-magnificent edifices and institutions, locked-in to tried-and-true exilic strategies, and hypnotized into inaction by dreams of an unreal “Jerusalem,” they are much more focused on the Jewish past and present than the Jewish future. In the case of far-flung communities, this is obvious and needs little argument. These communities once had a *raison d’être* that made perfect sense and served their purpose with distinction, but now they exist in order to recapture and enshrine their own past. Unable to contemplate abandoning the beautiful shuls and old neighborhoods, these communities have become museums, expending tremendous amounts of money and energy maintaining a community that has lost its reason to be. And so, instead of creating a transformed Jewish future, a real Jerusalem, these people are lost in a reverie about an irretrievable and unworkable Diaspora past.

There are many Diaspora communities that have a future; they should be supported. There is no question, however, that many communities clearly do not and only survive, synthetically, on memories of days gone by and former glory. The key indicators of a community’s future are: the involvement and commitment of its young people; its educational system; its marriage and birthrates. These factors clearly show that, for many Jewish communities around the globe, the time has come to pack up, sell the shul, learn Hebrew, and heed the words of our practical dreamer-ancestors: “Next year in Jerusalem.”

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Jewish Population Trends in Israel and the Diaspora

Sergio DellaPergola

After the loss of six million during the Shoah, the world Jewish population was estimated at eleven million in 1945. It took about 13 years to add one million Jews to the post-*Shoah* total, but the next 45 years were not enough to add a second million: world Jewry was estimated at 12,948,000

in 2003. Zero population growth reflects mostly negative balances between Jewish births and Jewish deaths, and between accessions to and secessions from Judaism. Low “effectively Jewish” birthrates also reflect widespread out-marriages and low propensities to identify the majority of the respective

children as Jews.

In Israel, Jews have constituted a solid majority of the total population since 1948, while Jews in other countries constituted small minorities in their respective environments. Israel's Jewish population steadily increased from approximately half a million in 1945 and one million in 1950 to over 5.1 million in 2003. Diaspora Jewry was stable from 10.5 million in 1945 to 10.2 million in 1960, notwithstanding mass *aliyah* following Israel's independence. The Diaspora population, however, rapidly diminished to 7.8 million in 2003. Over the 1945–2003 period, Israel's total growth of over 4.6 million was due half to the balance of immigrants and emigrants, and half to the balance of births and deaths.

International migration reshaped the geographical map of world Jewry and fundamentally changed the environments in which Jewish life developed. Since 1945 over five million Jews and their non-Jewish family members have moved between countries and continents. Jewish migration's wave-like pattern has reflected predominant crisis or push-dominated determinants. Two major migration waves occurred in the wake of Israel's independence, between May 1948 and 1951, and since the end of 1989, with the great exodus from the former Soviet Union (FSU). Jews massively moved out of countries where they had been long discriminated against, to societies offering political freedom and socioeconomic opportunities.

The Middle East, North Africa, Ethiopia, the FSU, and other parts of Eastern Europe and the Balkans witnessed most of their Jews emigrating. Large numbers of Jews also left Latin America and South Africa, and to a lesser extent the United Kingdom and other European countries. Major recipients of Jewish migration — besides Israel — were the United States, France, Canada, Australia, and more recently Germany. The overall effect of these changes was a significant concentration and correlation of the Jewish presence with major indicators of national socioeconomic development and life quality. Israel itself — beyond the unique cultural-ideological effects of Zionism — rose during the second half of the 20th century from a small and quite underdeveloped country to a stable and competitive geopolitical and economic presence internationally. In 2003, 44 percent of world Jewry lived in the United States and Canada, 39 percent in Israel, and 17 percent in other countries.

The social structure of Jewish communities worldwide also deeply changed. Currently over 50 percent of the total world Jewry live in six major metropolitan areas (Greater New York, Los Angeles, Southern Florida, Greater Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Jerusalem) and two-thirds live in 20 large cities. Massive movement out of older Jewish occupations in trade and industry led to growing concentration in management and especially in academic, liberal, and technical professions. While the family long functioned as the cornerstone of Jewish society, over the past decades sweeping changes occurred in the conventional roles of marriage and procreation. For example, low birthrates in the Diaspora and the erosive effects of out-marriage on the Jewish identity of children produce remarkably older age compositions.

Continuation of these trends in the foreseeable future may lead to continuing Jewish population growth in Israel and a decrease in the rest of world Jewry. By the end of the current decade, Israel might comprise for the first time more Jews than the United States. Already, a majority of all Jewish school-age children globally live in Israel. By the end of the third decade of the 21st century, Israel might comprise an absolute majority of world Jewry. Facing the rapid growth of world population, the share of Jews is bound to diminish in each major area of the world, including Israel. The implicit weakening of the Jewish presence on the global scene calls for careful consideration of the deeper causes of current trends, and for concerted efforts to moderate or reverse their consequences.

While, over the past decades, Jews have been exposed and have responded to major social changes in globalization trends, the Jewish future depends on the ability and willingness to develop a meaningful sense of belonging among the younger generation. Jewish demography cannot be reduced to pure biology, as its major thrust rests on transmitted values and education.

Facing these trends and prospects, two quite different sets of issues stand at the center of the Jewish agenda. In most Diaspora communities, the challenge is how to preserve the sense of a cohesive and meaningful Jewish community while enjoying the whole gamut of creative opportunities offered by open and non-hostile societies. From a demographic point of view, those who wish to be part of the Jewish way of life should be persuaded that a cultural



collectivity cannot survive in the long term without the biological foundations of family and children. A related challenge is how to pierce the surface and reach inside those who do not bother nor want to belong, in order to revive in them a spark of historical memory and mutual responsibility, if not a sense of pride and mission. The main challenge in Israel is how a clear Jewish population majority can be preserved. Differential growth rates, ethno-religious population composition, and territorial configurations need to be considered when trying to solve the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Interconnections among security, the economy,

the demography of international migration and family patterns, and brave political decision-making will determine whether the nature of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state can be maintained and transmitted. The solutions provided to these challenges will certainly influence the world's outlook on the Jews in the 21st century.

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A Phoenix Over Germany

Wladimir Struminski

While the Jewish population in nearly all countries of the Diaspora declines, the Jewish population in Germany boasts an unprecedented boom. In the past 15 years, the number of Jews in that country roughly tripled to reach an estimated 150,000. This would make Germany the home of the fourth-largest Jewish community in Europe.

In the 1950s, the Jewish population in Germany had been estimated at a mere 20,000. While a small number of Jews preferred to settle in Communist East Germany, the vast majority chose to live in the Western part of the country. In the shadow of the Holocaust, Jewish life on German soil did not appear self-evident. A large share of the Jews preferred to think of their stay in the Federal Republic as temporary. "We will move to Israel soon," was the mantra of the day.

In reality, this rarely happened. Rather, the Jewish population kept growing as Jews emigrated from Eastern Europe. By the 1980s, the Jewish communities had some 30,000 registered members, while the total number of Jews was estimated at 40,000 to 50,000. (In Germany, the local Jewish communities are public-law corporations with known membership. Not all Jews, however, chose to become community members.)

Not less significantly, in the course of time, the mood of the "Jewish street" changed. The notion of Germany as a permanent home for its Jews, rather

than a fading episode, became more and more the accepted norm. This change of attitude reflected acclimatization and the increased weight of a postwar generation born or raised in the country as well as a growing trust in Germany's willingness to learn from its past.

The 1990s brought about massive emigration of Jews from the former Soviet Union (FSU). Despite the fall of the Soviet regime, the German government agreed to recognize Jews from the FSU as refugees, granting them residence and work permits as well as social rights. Thus, the way was paved for 250,000 immigrants, so far. Due to a significant proportion of non-Jewish family members, the actual number of Jewish immigrants is lower.

Furthermore, the German government's criteria for the recognition of Jewish refugees do not follow halakhic rules. Rather, children of at least one Jewish parent, mother or father, are eligible under the program. Yet the Jewish communities in Germany, being religious bodies, cannot grant membership to persons — immigrants or otherwise — who do not meet the criteria of Jewish law. All told, the communities have 100,000 registered members today. The number of Jews not belonging to a community is roughly estimated at another 50,000.

Jewish emigration from the former Soviet republics continues. In the coming years, some 10,000 people per year are expected to make Germany their

new home under the Jewish refugee program. The influx has dramatically strengthened Jewish life. Today, 83,000 of the registered community members are post-Soviet arrivals. In other words: without the immigrants, the number of registered Jews would have dwindled to just 17,000.

At the same time, the wave of immigration created a formidable challenge. Most immigrants have joined the Jewish communities. Indeed, the wave of immigration enabled the creation of new communities in a number of cities like Rostock, Cottbus, or Frankfurt on the Oder in East Germany. The new members' links to Judaism, however, are often tenuous at best. For this reason, the communities invest large amounts of energy and money not just in an expanded physical infrastructure but in Jewish education and fostering Jewish consciousness as well. This effort will continue for years to come.

For their part, German authorities extend moral and financial support for the integration effort at the federal, state, and local levels. In early 2003, the federal government signed a state treaty with the Central Council of Jews in Germany, the highest Jewish representative body, pledging annual assistance of three million Euros (3.3 million dollars), in part to support the integration of Jewish immigrants.

Until now, the "Russian" majority has not attained full political representation in the governing bodies of local communities and Jewish organizations at state and federal levels. Given the fact that the communities are democratically ruled and choose their boards on the one-member-one-vote basis, growing "Russian" representation is a matter of organization and time.

Tensions between "old-timers" and "Russians" exist, resulting, among other things, in a debate over

whether Russian should become an official language of the communities. In practice, of course, the use of Russian in the communities, including their publications, is widespread. The Jewish leadership is determined to foster immigration and keep those already in the country within the community framework. Also, for the young generation, linguistic and cultural integration is easier than for their parents or grandparents.

In the longer term, the main question focuses on the community's identity. A central question is, to what extent will the enlarged Jewish population ensure its continuity by establishing Jewish families and passing on Jewish tradition? Another issue is Jewish identity in relation to German society. As in most European countries, German national identity is predominantly ethnic. For minorities, this makes full identification with the country of their residence more difficult. So do expressions of xenophobia, even though Germany by no means leads the European field in this respect. For Jews, obviously, the history of the Holocaust remains an additional barrier and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

However, many Germans are striving to expand their national identity beyond ethnic boundaries. The process of European unification changes mindsets, too. Such developments in German society are likely to contribute, with time, to a Jewish sense of belonging. How fast and in what form this happens, remains to be seen.

Wladimir Struminski is a journalist. He was born in Warsaw in 1954. In 1969 he moved to Germany and then to Israel in 1982. Since 1987 he has been the Israel correspondent for the leading German-Jewish newspaper Jüdische Allgemeine Wochenzeitung.

South African Jewry: A Glimpse Into the Future

Milton Shain

As South Africa moves toward its first decade of democratic rule, the health and state of its Jewish community presents a complex picture. On the one hand, the community is diminishing in size (from 118,200 or 3.1 percent of the "white" population in 1970 to about 80,000 or less than

half a percent of the total population). On the other hand, religious and cultural life is showing a remarkable efflorescence. What is clear, however, is that the community does not have the self-confidence, prestige, and access to authority it enjoyed in the "old" South Africa.

This is not to say that the "new" South Africa is



at odds with Jewish well-being. On the contrary, Jews have welcomed the new democratic dispensation. Like all South Africans, they are fully protected under the constitution by a Bill of Rights, which enshrines religious and cultural freedom. And, given the ANC-led government's opposition to racism, the climate for opposing antisemitism in South Africa publicly is more favorable than in the past. In short, the new democratic South Africa poses no problems for Jewish comfort and cohesion.

That cohesion is manifest in strong centralized institutions such as the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, the South African Zionist Federation, and the United Orthodox Synagogues. In addition, a powerful civil religion has evolved, centered upon the Holocaust and Israel, ensured by a network of Jewish day schools that cater to the vast majority of pupils. Ideological differences rarely impinge on Jewish cohesion and have certainly never threatened to undermine unity. The sorts of divisions and debates that characterize North American Jewry in most cases bypass the tip of Africa. While relations between Jews and Christians are cordial and comfortable, ecumenical and interfaith initiatives, like those in the U.S., are rare.

If there are divisions and incipient debates among Jews, these concern the rise of ultra-Orthodoxy among significant segments of the community, especially in Johannesburg, where about two-thirds of Jews reside, and where groups such as Lubavitch and *Ohr Sameach* have grown substantially. In Cape Town the *baal teshuvah* movement is less prevalent, although hitherto unknown tensions between Orthodox and Reform Jews (the latter less than 10 percent of the affiliated population) have emerged.

To the extent that divisions within the community exist, these are minimized against the backdrop of burgeoning Moslem anti-Zionism, often blended with crude antisemitism. In recent decades, South African Moslems have increasingly identified with international Islamic struggles in general and with the Palestinian people in particular. In Cape Town, where the majority of the approximately 650,000 Moslems reside, their voice is powerful and often threatening. This was

particularly evident in the wake of the failed Camp David talks in 2000 and at the "World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance" in Durban in 2001. Moslem extremists turned the gathering into an exercise in bigotry and prejudice, palpably hijacking the occasion.

Such events serve only to consolidate Jewish cohesion and loyalty. But even without such hostility, the prospects of Jewish assimilation into the "rainbow" nation are minimal. Youth emigration poses the greatest challenge to Jewish continuity. In a national survey carried out in 1998, only 12 percent of Jews anticipated leaving the country within five years. But for the age group under 30, the figure is substantially higher: about one in four. Personal safety and security are cited as the main concerns.

Undoubtedly, the future of South African Jewry depends on the nature of transformation. The vast majority of Jews do not wish to emigrate; they are deeply rooted in the country of their birth, and the community's values are essentially consonant with the new open and market-driven South African ethos. Their skills can certainly assist in the development of a

democratic South Africa. In the unlikely event of instability and a major demographic shift, all aspects of Jewish life will be affected: institutional memberships, synagogue life, welfare needs and services, schooling, funding — to say nothing of general morale. The emigration of philanthropists and benefactors is already being felt in an aging community heavily dependent on self-funding. Of course, emigration also affects the quality of leadership, and at this time of social transformation the need for wise and sensitive guidance is acute. To date this has been manifest and there is good cause for optimism, both insofar as the Jews of South Africa are concerned and the country as a whole.

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Youth emigration poses the greatest challenge to Jewish continuity.

Prague: New Colors on a Gray Life

Tomas Jelinek

If one comes to the old Prague Jewish Quarter today, one finds that the most common souvenirs relate either to the Golem or to Franz Kafka. The usual tourist kitsch points, in its awkward way, to the most flourishing periods of Prague Jewry. Prague gained world prominence during the period of its Renaissance. The second golden period came 400 years later. In the second half of the 20th century, Prague Jews contributed significantly to the cultural development of Central Europe. Franz Kafka, Max Brod, Franz Werfel, and Egon Kisch are among the most prominent representatives of this period. There were about 50,000 Jews in Prague before the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia; about 36,500 perished during the Holocaust.

After the war the community was reestablished with little more than 7,000 members, most of them Holocaust survivors or soldiers from the Allied armies. This new life of freedom lasted only three years. The Communist coup brought another form of dictatorship, which quite quickly during the Slansky trial became openly antisemitic. There were two postwar waves of Jewish emigration. The first responded to the new Communist regime in 1948. The second wave was related to the Prague spring in 1968. During the 40 years of communism, the community lived under the surveillance of the Secret Police, and traditional Jewish life became very restricted. It survived only because of the courage of a few committed individuals and the help of foreign Jewish organizations.

The 1989 Velvet Revolution radically changed Czech society. The gray life of the Prague Jewish community (PJC) became more colorful as unexpected opportunities and challenges emerged. Leaders of the community concentrated on three objectives: support for Holocaust survivors, property restitution, and building traditional Jewish institutions.

Since the Velvet Revolution, the PJC has built sev-

eral institutions to meet the needs of its population, addressing the needs of both the elderly and children. This would not have been possible without international support from organizations like the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the Jewish Agency, and the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation. Restitution efforts were complicated because the country lacks any restitution law, which would have given the community a means with which to reclaim its historical property. In most of the cases the PJC was able to

reclaim cemeteries and synagogues, but recovering commercially viable real estate was much more difficult. The PJC acquired about 30 buildings, some of which are used by the community while others are rented for commercial purposes to generate income for the community budget. The PJC earns about 80 percent of its budget; the remainder is raised from donors and the Czech government.

Outsiders often wonder how the PJC became so self-sufficient, a unique position in Central and Eastern Europe. There is no easy answer, but a list of relevant factors offers a few clues. In the wake of the war, the community only numbered about 1,600 people — a number that has fluctuated little in the ensuing years. The PJC leadership was relatively well-connected politically, and this was crucial during political negotiations leading up to and following the revolution. Democratic politicians were amenable to moral arguments and were willing, often, to return Jewish communal property even without legal obligation. The community received critical support in this area from the American Jewish Committee and later the World Jewish Congress. Our real estate portfolio includes more than 200 items, but that includes 170 cemeteries and other non-economically productive assets. The World Monument Fund and local municipalities remain our primary partners in preserving our cultural and religious heritage.

Today, the PJC has 1,600 members with the aver-

The gray life of the Prague Jewish community became more colorful as unexpected opportunities and challenges emerged.



age age of 57 years. About 800 people are Holocaust survivors. We are quite an elderly community, but despite a high mortality rate we are growing slowly. Any growth in the population is a result of immigrants from Israel, the FSU, and the United States, along with some growth in affiliation among previously unaffiliated Jews. Jewish life here is very vital. There are several Jewish communal organizations, and four Jewish magazines are published in Prague. The PJC leadership will soon decide about protocols for non-halakhic Jews to access our community services and criteria for non-halakhic conversions. The community is also trying to develop a communal framework where Ortho-

dox and Conservative synagogues will function as part of a broader community.

I hope that the PJC will be a very vital and dynamic community in Europe in 10 years. Our Jewish life will be strengthened when the Czech Republic joins the European Union next year and we no longer need to pay tariffs on imported kosher food. Our greatest challenge, though, is to rebuild Jewish Prague on the world map of Jewish thinking.

Tomas Jelinek was born in 1968 in Prague. Since 2001 he has served as President of the PJC. He was Economic Advisor to President Vaclav Havel from 1996 to 2002.

The Paradox of Argentina

Noga Tarnopolsky

The Jewish community of Argentina is in the throes of flux. The calamitous economic crisis of December 2001, in which Argentina declared the largest sovereign default in history, has brought with it a silver lining of communitarian renewal, so that both great pain and great hope now characterize what was once a placid but thriving community.

The aftershocks of the crisis are deeply felt. Most economists estimate its effects to be double those of the Crash of '29 on the United States, and the brunt of the burden is borne by what was once a prosperous middle-class that historically maintained Argentina's standard of living above that of the rest of Latin America. Today, an estimated 50 percent of Argentina's 37 million inhabitants live in poverty.

Jews have been in Argentina since inquisitional times, when the territory of the River Plate formed the southernmost tip of the Inca empire. The flag of the province of Salta even contains a Star of David, and Marrano names are commonplace among the Catholic aristocracy.

But contemporary Jewry traces its roots to the late 19th century, when Argentina, with its huge, empty domains and colossal dreams of grandeur, longed for citizens that would settle the pioneering new state. In 1881, as pogroms burned across Eastern Europe, the government of Argentina saw an opportunity and — in a move designed to help fashion an educated, enlightened, and hardworking population — did what no other nation has done before or since: it sent an emissary to “the Russian

Empire” to foment Jewish emigration.

On the whole, the Jewish community has fared as well or as poorly as the nation itself; Argentine Jews are as patriotic and intensely identified with their homeland as non-Jewish Argentines, and, like them, they are escaping the economic crisis in huge numbers. Mid-century, the Jews of Argentina numbered 400,000; the latest estimates hold that approximately 180,000 of them remain today.

In 2001, Israel declared Argentine Jews an “imperiled” community and, with the Jewish Agency and the United Jewish Communities, put together a total emergency budget of approximately \$16 million to help them resettle in Israel. Close to 7,000 Jews made *aliyah*. A similar number of Jews headed to other destinations — Spain and Canada heading the list.

For the year 2003, the sum of emergency assistance provided to Argentina by the Jewish communities of the United States stands at a staggering \$14 million, mostly managed by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

Before the crash, Argentine Jews had been hard hit by two acts of terror that came, like the World Trade Center attacks, out of the blue. A truck bomb demolished Israel's Buenos Aires embassy in 1992, killing 29 people, 4 of them Israeli diplomats. On July 17, 1994, the seven-story building of the main Jewish communal organization was targeted; 85 people perished in the bombing, making it, until September 11, 2001, the worst attack against a civilian population since World War II.

The community evinces remarkable resilience.

While Argentina has abdicated its basic welfare responsibilities and has left its citizens to fend for themselves, their ability to fend, given help, is daunting. It is impossible not to be awed by the revitalization taking place today and by the extensive social network that has been resurrected. In one way or another, 36,000 people are being helped.

Economic indicators are not yet moving up and economists predict any significant upsurge will take years, but hope is in the air in the form of a new phenomenon most commonly referred to as *el fenómeno K* — “K” standing in for Néstor Kirchner, the new president of Argentina, who last May won

a fluke election with only 22 percent of the vote but is now enjoying widespread admiration.

For Jews, it has been a year of taking stock. In sharp contrast to 2002, fewer than 1,000 Argentine Jews will have made *aliyah* this year, a downturn attributed not only to Kirchner’s personal popularity but also to the war in Iraq, the Israeli recession, and obstacles faced by Argentine immigrants to Israel, some of whom are returning.

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Empowering Local Communities

Svetlana Yakimenko

In 1987, I joined a peace march from Moscow to Leningrad where I met an American woman named Sallie Gratch; she was wearing a Jewish star. As an English teacher, I was seeking opportunities to develop my speaking skills and told her that I, too, was a Jew. Sallie was intrigued to learn that I was not a refusenik but rather a Jew who had a strong connection to my roots in Russia and only a minimal interest in my Jewish heritage. And so, our friendship began. In the past 16 years, Jewish life in the former Soviet Union (FSU) has changed dramatically and, as a result of that encounter, I have been an active participant in that transformation.

My Jewish identity evolved, in part, through my relationships with Jewish women in the United States who believed that one builds Jewish life wherever Jews live, maximizing the quality of life with the resources at hand. In 1989, Sallie founded an organization called Project Keshet to facilitate our work, and I became the founding FSU director. I learned about the difficulty American Jewish women had had integrating their Judaism, feminism, and social activism and wanted to work toward an integration of the multiple identities that are common among FSU women. For our programming to be meaningful and engaging of significant numbers of Jewish women here, we would need to embrace all of those identities.

Text study has proved to be a powerful tool for reconnecting Jews with our heritage. It speaks to the highly literate and intellectual population of this region and helps us access and understand Judaism.

Text study programs have resulted in a better-educated Jewish population. These programs also offer a way to engage Jews from different branches of Judaism and often competing Jewish organizations. Moreover, this classical framework of study also encourages a more civil society. It is a format in which many ideas emerge and are constructively evaluated, validated, and, ideally, acted upon.

Text study is most meaningful when it leads to a deeper understanding of the relationship between humanity and God, and our role as activists. For example, our women’s groups study texts on relationships and then organize multinational community campaigns against domestic violence. This past year, women’s groups in my network organized over 85 women’s seders. Even more compelling than the reading of the Haggadah were the steps each group then took to move women and Jews from slavery to freedom in the coming year. In Rybinsk, Russia, the local Jewish women’s group invited non-Jewish government leaders to their seder and were delighted when all present committed to work together against fascism and antisemitism in the coming year as well as support more women for elected offices.

Empowered with Jewish values and the skills of group process, local women have opportunities to connect with other groups in the FSU. While antisemitism still exists in the FSU, it is possible to build relationships with decent people in government and non-Jewish organizations that share our vision for creating a better life. By building activist



coalitions, I have seen local Jews become a light unto the nations, advancing the status of entire communities and transforming the communal perception of Jews.

The essential humanitarian relief provided by world Jewry has had the unfortunate side effect of creating a Jewish population that is often unable or unwilling to be self-reliant. As a result, one of the most critical aspects of my work has been to educate FSU Jews about the Jewish commitment to *tikkun olam* and *tzedakah*. Although women with whom I work remain poor by American standards, they now routinely volunteer for Jewish and women's causes and, in many cases, provide funding (although at low levels) to these same charities.

Economic self-sufficiency is the critical piece for ensuring the future of Jewish life in the FSU. Very often, organizations will provide computer training to children. Their parents also need that training in order to support their families and, eventually, support Jewish life. To that end, I have been active in the development of micro-enterprise loan pools to support small women-owned businesses. To date, every loan has been repaid and there is a waiting list of women wanting to participate. Moreover, each loan recipient learns that it is critical for all who can do so, to give back. Economic self-sufficiency programs are critical for

many in this region, but especially for women at risk — victims of domestic violence and those intrigued by overseas “opportunities” (generally scams for trafficking in women).

Until our society achieves economic success, it will be difficult to provide the opportunities necessary to sustain Jewish life. As Jews, we find the *mitzvah* of *aliyah* compelling. But, as Russian Jews, we mourn the loss of our communities' greatest asset — our youth. Likewise, we mourn the disruption of our families when children move away and parents (often single mothers) remain behind. If FSU Jewry is to thrive, economic stability in our region is essential.

Just as Russia has mountains and rivers — it will always have Jews. In the coming years, my dream is that our Jewish life will authentically reflect the history, culture, and experiences of our society. I believe that our ideas and passion will have as great an impact on world Jewry as world Jewry has had on our Jewish rebirth.

Svetlana Yakimenko is Director of Project Keshet in the Independent States of the former Soviet Union and a former English teacher. Project Keshet is the largest Jewish women's group in the FSU, working to build Jewish life and advance women's rights. The organization is sponsoring a week-long voyage down the Volga River for Western and FSU women in June 2004. Both Svetlana and Sallie will be on the boat.

Jewish Life in America's Small Communities

Lee Shai Weissbach

Despite the fact that we most often think of American Jewish life in terms of what transpires in large and perhaps midsize cities, throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th, most of America's individual Jewish communities were actually smaller ones set apart from the country's major Jewish centers. In the late 1870s, for example, there were no more than 26 cities in the United States with Jewish populations over 1,000, but there were 136 Jewish communities of at least 100 but fewer than 1,000 residents. By the late 1920s, there were some 500 triple-digit Jewish communities in the United States, virtually all in small-town settings. America's smaller Jewish centers were, in a sense,

“Diaspora” communities with a character quite different from that of communities in major cities.

Jews who lived in small communities faced certain limitations where a Jewish lifestyle was concerned. Their choices of congregational affiliation were narrow; their opportunities to provide a thorough Jewish education for their children were restricted; and, if they identified with a philosophy that was generally out of favor in the small-town environment — such as secularism or socialism — their prospects of finding like-minded neighbors were poor. Still, in what might be called the “classic era” of small-town Jewish life (the period from the late 19th century to the mid-20th), these communities

held a certain appeal. They possessed at least the basics of Jewish religious, cultural, and educational facilities — a synagogue, a kosher butcher, an afternoon or Sunday religious school program—and they offered a close-knit social network that many appreciated, even though it was based in part on the exclusion of Jews from the mainstream of small-town society. For small-town Jews of East European background, the sense of being part of an extended family was reinforced by Yiddish cultural and linguistic connections. Moreover, those who lived in small communities found economic opportunities unavailable in the big city, and they escaped much of the stress and turmoil of an urban environment.

In recent decades, the basic nature of small-town Jewish life in America has changed dramatically, as chain stores have devastated many of the family businesses that once served as the foundations of small communities and as the college-educated children of small-town Jewish families often have decided not to return to their hometowns. While a few small communities of the classic era have grown and others have simply been absorbed into larger metropolitan Jewish communities, a great many have declined or disappeared completely. Moreover, those smaller Jewish settlements that have survived and those that have been created more recently are very different in character from the small communities of the classic era. Jews in small towns today are commonly transplants from big cities rather than individuals with small-town roots. They are often professionals, educators, or retirees, rather than entrepreneurs or artisans look-

ing to make a way in business, and they seldom feel socially marginalized in small-town society the way their predecessors often did.

Because the small-town Jewish culture of the late 19th and early 20th centuries is gone, and with it the cohesive and supportive Jewish communities that many older small-town Jews remember with great fondness, leading a Jewish life in a small-town setting is often more difficult. Yet, because small-town Jews now take advantage of new resources to stay in touch with the larger world, both Jewish and secular, living Jewishly in a small community is in some ways easier.

Today, as in times past, individuals considering the prospect of living in a small community must determine the costs and benefits of doing so. Those intent on living an intensive Jewish life, whether based on religious observance or on strong ethnic and cultural involvements, are likely to avoid smaller Jewish settlements. Nonetheless, Jews living in small towns need not sacrifice their Jewish identity. Several national organizations already make an effort to cater to the needs of more isolated Jewish centers, and even one or two individuals who take the initiative to maintain congregations, organize communal events, and network with other communities can make a huge difference in overcoming the limitations of Jewish life in America's small-town "Diaspora."

Lee Shai Weissbach is Professor of History at the University of Louisville. His book on small-town Jewish life is forthcoming from Yale University Press.

Life on the Edge

Harry Brechner

There is an extremely poignant aspect of Jewish life that Professor Weissbach only addresses tangentially: engagement. The depth of engagement that small-town Jewish life affords, and demands, is vast. There is an authentic need for involvement, and people who are involved tend to develop a strong sense of competence and independence. As a rabbi, I am challenged to learn a considerable amount of practical *halakhah* and lore that my colleagues in larger metropolitan congregations and settings might not need to master. Most large Jewish centers have institutions and infrastructures that support Jewish life but, in doing

so, often remove basic Jewish life-cycle questions and experiences from the everyday lives of Jews.

Living in a small Jewish community demands skills that I never acquired during my rabbinic training. It also demands that lay people acquire Jewish skills they would never employ in a larger community. How many Conservative rabbis encounter questions regarding *tahara* and *tachrichin*, ritual washing and shrouding of the dead? What additional factors come into play when a group of lay volunteers does *tahara* for a young congregant who died in a motor-cycle accident? The emphasis on interfaith teaching



and community building is also a significant part of small-town Jewish life. Every single soul counts deeply and every single Jew is precious.

Last year, on the 7th of Adar, the *yahrzeit* of Moshe Rabbenu, the *chevra kadisha* decided to invite members of the *ghusal*, the Moslem burial society, to our learning and feast. Members from the local Sunni and Ismaili communities agreed to join us. The learning and food were wonderful, but what was astonishing was that these leaders from two Moslem communities had never been in the same room together, never met, never shaken hands, and here they were in our little *shtiebel*, our little synagogue, sharing a meal and an experience.

I know that the children of my congregation, as well as my own children, may have gaps in their formal Jewish education because there is no Jewish day school on Vancouver Island. I am banking on the fact that we are succeeding in the affective realm. The children and youth of our congregation feel closely connected to one another and to the synagogue. They are also acutely aware that they are a minority in Victoria and need one another as they navigate their childhood and teenage years; their minority consciousness profoundly shapes their sense of belonging to the synagogue and community. They feel that the synagogue is a second home.

The plethora of Jewish expression and learning opportunities that exist in major centers does not exist in our small town, but instead we experience a sense of being integral to the community. Synagogue members create Jewish expressions that reflect the particular and personal values and aesthetics that speak to the congregation. In some ways, our geographical remoteness offers a certain freedom, and, if used wisely, that freedom is fertile ground for creativity. Here in Victoria we like to think that we are cutting edge, on the edge.

Rabbi Harry Brechner is the spiritual leader of Congregation Emanu-El in Victoria, B.C., on Vancouver Island. Prior to that, he served as Head of School for the New Orleans Jewish Day School and Director of the Bureau of Jewish Education for Greater New Orleans. He served as a combat medic in the Israel Defense Forces and has traveled with his wife RaeAnn throughout Russia, the Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Nepal, India, and Thailand. He also makes a great kosher gumbo and jambalaya.

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Exploring Jewish Identity Through a Camera's Lens

Frédéric Brenner, *Diaspora: Homelands in Exile*. Volume 1: photographs, 328 pp.
Volume 2: voices, 153 pp. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003), \$100

Frédéric Brenner launched his career exploring the dimensions of Jewish identity on Purim in 1978. That night he photographed an angel, a child dressed in a white winged costume as she scurried up the sparkling snow-covered stones of a Jerusalem street toward an arched passageway in the Mea Shearim quarter. Simultaneously, his camera caught, through the darkened stone arch silhouetted against the pale stones of an apartment building in the Hasidic neighborhood, the rapid gait of a Hasid — *streym!* on his head, staring intently at the ground before him.

Brenner's path eventually led him away from Hasidim toward a wide variety of Jews, especially those in remote areas of the world. His work, he writes, "was driven by a sense of imminent loss. Two thousand years of history were about to vanish . . ." Brenner felt "a desire and a responsibility" to document "permutations of survival in exile." As his interest in photographing Jews acquired intellectual coherence, he moved beyond documenting disappearing communities toward a project of portraying dimensions of Jewish identity in the Diaspora. Purim with its story of Esther became Brenner's modal narrative. No matter how much "at home" Jews may appear, whether in Rome where they have lived at least as long if not longer than Catholic Romans, or in Israel where they live in a Jewish state, they remain in exile. Thus Brenner's work seeks to explore a Jewish theological concept and existential condition through photography.

Brenner's technique shares commonalities with the equally ambitious Farm Security Administration (FSA) photography project that sought to portray the American nation during the Depression. Like the FSA photographers, Brenner speaks to his subjects, elicits their stories, and develops a rapport. Then he tries to translate his interpretation of what he has heard into photographs, aware that his images serve as a mirror for Jews and others. Like the

FSA photographers, Brenner poses his subjects, composing his photographs in his mind's eye even before he snaps the shutter. Unlike the FSA photographers, Brenner did not have to put up with orders and advice issued from Washington. He is his own boss and shapes his photographs to tell the Jewish story he desires. On occasion he revisits his subjects. For example, he photographed a group of Jewish barbers and their customers in a barber-shop in Tajikistan, USSR, in 1989. Then, in 1997, he photographed the former Tajik barbers who had immigrated to Israel standing in the Dead Sea with their Israeli customers. Despite the evident continuities in their occupation, the juxtaposition of images suggests displacement and alienation. After all, barbers are not normally working while standing in the Dead Sea; their new Jewish homeland is neither familiar nor comfortable.

Volume 2 includes commentaries from Jewish scholars accompanying the photographic retrospective in Volume 1. Rabbi Tsvi Blanchard characterizes Brenner as "a talmudic rabbi who has created a photographic Babylonian Talmud." Blanchard argues that the photographs invite discussion, exegesis, and imaginative association. Brenner has assembled a diverse and impressive group of commentators. I found myself particularly drawn to the telling remarks of Stephan Greenblatt, a Shakespearean scholar at Harvard, the sensitive insights of Julius Lester, a writer and Jewish Studies scholar at the University of Massachusetts, and the thoughtful reflections of Stanley Cavell, an American philosopher. But I also appreciated the detailed historical and ethnographic descriptions of Michael Zand, especially about Jewish culture in the former Soviet Union. One can read Volume 1, the photographs, without consulting Volume 2, the voices; or one can move back and forth somewhat awkwardly between the two large volumes. Not every im-



age elicits commentary, not every commentary speaks effectively to the photograph. Brenner also provides information on how he came to make a particular photograph.

There is no gainsaying Brenner's accomplishment. He has produced an impressive and moving body of work, which can also be seen at an exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum opening in October. He challenges those of us who imagine the Jewish condition in our age as rooted and secure. He invites us to summon up in our own mind's eye just what Jews look like. One of my favorite photographs comes from Brenner's American so-

jour. It is a contemporary *minyan*: an image of 10 faculty, students, and cantors at the Jewish Theological Seminary. All of the women are wearing *tallit* and *tefillin*. Brenner's composition suggests to me an American fulfillment of his Purim angel's aspirations.

Deborah Dash Moore directs the Program in Jewish Studies at Vassar College. She is co-author with Howard Rock of Cityscapes: A History of New York in Images. Her book, GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation is forthcoming.



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Djerba: Jerusalem of North Africa

Stefan Sablic

To describe Djerba, Tunisia, and the life there properly I would need to be a novelist or a poet. The community has preserved its ancient traditions, customs, and intimate knowledge of Jewish Law, the execution of which is its main preoccupation. Despite that I noticed that people have begun to feel the change of time and life around them and that they are adapting and finding solutions to cope with profound social, political, and technological changes.

At first glance *Hara Kebira* seems like any other Tunisian or North African Arab village: narrow, dusty alleys that are difficult to distinguish, little white-blue houses with arches, a few lonely palm trees. The people I meet are suspicious of strangers. Djerba has been called the "Jerusalem of North Africa," and it dates its existence back to the time of the First Temple. After my initial tour I discover a very lively Jewish life: synagogues, schools, yeshivas, communal Shabbat ovens, shops with Hebrew signs, and even a few kiosks with "kosher" signs selling something called *brik* — a fried dough stuffed with egg and a few very hot spices.

Hara Kebira has 12 synagogues, and you can find several successive *minyanim* for each service. Any member of the community can serve as the *chazan*, or cantor, and the melodic pattern is simple, enabling the whole community to participate. Most of the synagogues post a large number of signs on the wall saying: "If you talk in the synagogue, where will you pray?" The purpose of these signs becomes clearer to

me when I see that everybody is talking about business, life, news, and gossip. Life takes place around the prayers and around the synagogue, which is literally the house of the assembly, or *beit hakneset*.

The community endeavors to support its young people and the transmission of knowledge. While some of the youth continue as teachers, others become craftsmen or merchants. I notice that the market is a place of interaction between Jews and Moslems, and it is also an arena in which important aspects of identity, self-image, and mutual perceptions are defined and enacted.

Jews in Djerba, like many of their neighbors in time and place, have learned to be happy if the enemy is at least silent. Although the streets appear peaceful, I am told that local police — dressed as civilians — watch the neighborhood and provide some assurance of safety for the Jewish population. While this information dissipates my feelings of freedom and contentment and leaves me feeling uncertain in this Moslem world, the Jews of Djerba accept this reality as a "law of nature" — that Jews have always been persecuted and exposed to hatred, misunderstanding, and intolerance. This is not a dark side of life, but a very ordinary fate of the Jewish people to cope and fight for the survival of Judaism — its traditions and way of life.

Stefan Sablic is a chazan in Serbia and Macedonia. He went to Djerba for two weeks of study.

Liftoff — the moment of departure from Israel — what more appropriate time to confront what it means to leave the Land after 18 years? But exhausted by the physical demands of moving a family abroad, I succumbed to sleep, awaking to face the rabbis' reproach only over Europe. A pastel sun rise, glimpsed through the clouds, seemed sure proof of God's presence and beneficence. But, arguably, all of the heavens are the airspace of the Land of Israel, and thus — celestial splendor not withstanding — the rabbis' fears of earthly life outside the Land remain wellfounded. The challenge: to transcend boundaries below; to sanctify God's name throughout God's creation.

I fully expected to find God even upon my descent — and perhaps less hidden than in Jerusalem of late — and I have not been disappointed. It is inspiration that I call God, and throughout my sojourn in Israel I took inspiration from the vitality and creativity of the People of Israel abroad. What I did not expect was to be so inspired by the dedication of those who maintain communities and perpetuate a faith away from both the embrace of the Land and those East Coast cities I think of as bastions of revitalized Judaism. Joining a Jewish community that cooperates across denominational divides is inspiring indeed.

I know the Land will serve as a source of inspiration wherever I roam. I see that Jews here too resonate to its call. Becoming a Diaspora Jew again means a greater responsibility: a dual focus, deeds on the ground with an eye turned toward Zion.

Chaia Beckerman, who has just moved to Youngstown, Ohio along with her husband Rabbi Joel Berman and two children, plans an eventual return to the challenges of life in Israel.

Rabbi Kassoff wonders how one can take this verse seriously. Certainly not in today's multicultural world. But what was the context in which this verse was written? Rabbinic messages reflect a particular position for a specific people in a precise time. Many of these messages were written to entreat Jews to remain Jewish when they had opportunities to become Christians, idol worshippers, and the like.

Perhaps, in persuading the people to live in Israel, the rabbis were endorsing a proto-Zionist movement. Their anthropomorphic explanation — giving human and physical terms to the unknowable — shows their genius at explaining the inexplicable.

Indeed the rabbis said, "God is everywhere." But wouldn't God have been terribly unhappy if Jews had not lived in the Diaspora, where more than 90 percent of Jewish culture and creativity was spawned? In fertile lands where a rich Jewish culture and religion flourished?

Instead of replacing the convictions of this verse with guilt, as often happens, today Diaspora communities — so very important to the abundant and colorful threads woven into the fabric of Jewish life — are forging contemporary expressions of a personal Judaism. These expressions are relevant to Jews in the ways they live — encompassing tradition, celebration, pluralism, and study.

Daniel Posen is Director of the Posen Foundation. He lives with his wife and children in Lucerne, Switzerland.

To live or not to live in the Land of Israel? From Abraham through the Middle Ages and until today many Jews have wrestled with this question and, therefore, I must not only take this text seriously but also read it carefully, within context.

While our text reflects the most extreme response to the question of the necessity of living in the Land, even as a minority, there are other views about the same issue in the talmudic text. (The beauty and power of the Talmud is its plurality of voices.) Other voices in the same pages not only acknowledge the legitimacy of living outside the land but are even celebratory of the power and creativity of Diaspora communities.

But if living in the land and outside of it are both legitimate, is there nothing particularly unique about living in it? Did our ancestors constantly seek to return and rebuild in Zion for nothing? Could we not have supported the Uganda scheme?

I agree that God's presence went with us and dwells with us throughout the

Diaspora. But I also know from our texts that God has a particular connection to Israel — that something of God's seeking vision of covenantal partnership is directed toward a particular place, and that my choice to live in the State of Israel is not meaningless.

Rabbi Rachel Sabbath-Beit Halachmi works and teaches at the Shalom Hartman Institute and the Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem.

Our Rabbis taught: One should always live in the Land of Israel, even in a town most of whose inhabitants are idolaters, but let no one live outside the Land, even in a town most of whose inhabitants are Israelites; for whoever lives in the Land of Israel may be considered to have a God, but whoever lives outside the Land may be regarded as one who has no God. Ketubot 110b

My first response to this text was to wonder how we can take it seriously today. So many Jews live outside the Land of Israel, as have most Jews for most of Jewish history. Have we all been without God all this time? The rabbis also teach us that God is everywhere — creator of the universe, as near to one who prays as the mouth to the ear. The text is a fascinating reminder of a place-bound theology we have outgrown.

I serve congregations that are about as far from the Land of Israel as one can get. Most of the adults in these communities have never been to Israel. The nearest Jewish bookstore is hundreds of miles away. Religion in the deep South is omnipresent: on the airwaves, in the schools, and notably in the courthouses. Jews, however, are not so present. While others may have the holiness of the land or the ease of sheer numbers and a kosher deli to sustain their relationship with God, these far-flung Jewish communities turn inward to find their Promised Land. Jerusalem will not come to us; we must create our own center with study, celebration, and worship. Under *sukkot* hung with cotton plants and over Shabbat dinner pitch-ins of fried chicken and pimento-cheese sandwiches, there is God. The Psalmist asks, "Where can I flee from Your presence?" Not even in the land of the catfish fry and the crawfish boil.

Rabbi Debra Kassoff is the Director of Rabbinic Services for the Institute of Southern Jewish Life. She provides and promotes Jewish learning and a rabbinic presence in isolated, underserved congregations throughout the Southern United States.

*NiSh'ma is the Hebrew word for "let us hear."

Truth-Telling and Comfort

Marion Shulevitz

"Sheila," an active woman in her mid-fifties, had terminal lung cancer. Her sister asked me to help her deal with her feelings of alternating hope and despair — although she had been waging a fierce battle against the cancer for some years, she was beginning to sense she might not win. What role could Judaism play to help her conquer her despair and marshal the positive forces of hope and healing? Were there Jewish resources for her?

As rabbi-chaplain, I have a mandate to provide religious, emotional, and spiritual guidance, comfort, and sustenance to those I serve. This is most vividly true for a hospice rabbi, whose "congregation" consists of discrete individuals, each facing the immanence of death. What are the end-of-life ethical issues that I, as a chaplain, must confront as I struggle to bring comfort and hope, within a Jewish context?

For Sheila, death was the enemy, an adversary to fight until the end, following the tradition that teaches us that preserving life is the supreme value. Her courage and resolve had served her well during the years of her illness. But now? Could I bring her to the next step,

to the acceptance of death as a part of life? This was a dilemma for me; my role as chaplain was not to persuade Sheila to change her attitude. Perhaps, however, I could help her modify her awareness of what she might fight for.

During one visit, we discussed Sheila's fervent desire to participate — to dance and celebrate at her niece's wedding. When I suggested setting an immediate goal — to join in some way with her family — her despair turned to a determination to survive for the event. I struggled with this. What if God did not respond to her prayers to reach this goal? Sheila, triumphant, joined the wedding celebration by telephone.

When she began looking toward Passover, which her family planned to celebrate with her in the hospital room as her condition deteriorated, I suggested a new goal — getting past her pain and feelings of despair. We read Tehilim, Psalms, asking God to help with her immediate goals.

The time soon came to recite the *Vidui*, the death-bed confessional. I struggled with the ethics of truth-telling vs. comfort. But although Jewish sources differ on whether

and when to tell patients the end is near, they all agree that it is even more important how we tell them. We talked about *teshuvah*, and how the *Vidui* could help her seek forgiveness, and make the path toward death a little more bearable. Soon, at her request, we recited it together, in Hebrew and English. I followed with another reading of the 23rd Psalm, concentrating on the move from "the valley of death" to "dwelling in the house of the Lord for eternity."

As a chaplain, I try to help my patients realize their own inner strengths and mobilize their inner resources as they prepare for their final journey into the unknown. I help them connect with their Jewish heritage. And not least, I try to be a Jewish comforting presence to a frightened soul in a time of grave fear and distress. Each patient has his or her own issues, which become my issues, with which I struggle as I try to respond as a Jew, as a woman, and, most of all, as a *mensch*.

Marion Shulevitz is Hospice Chaplain at JASA and Rabbi of the Amsterdam Nursing Home. She has been a Jewish chaplain at a number of New York hospitals.



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