

In My Opinion

OPERATION JOSEPH: THE RESCUE OF AMERICAN JEWISH YOUTH

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Since the publication of the Council of Jewish Federations (CJF) 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, there has been much agonizing by the American Jewish community. New initiatives to enhance Jewish education and outreach efforts to intermarried families are underway. However, there has been no major initiative of outreach to youth that attempts to reconnect them to the total community. Operation Joseph will be that initiative.

Before examining the specifics of Operation Joseph, consider briefly the present state of Jewish youth.

- There are currently 1.9 million children under the age of 18 in America, of which 62% are in the core Jewish population. The core population consists of 267,000 households, of which 29% include a child under 18.
- Just under half of all children in the NJPS households are currently being raised with Judaism as their religion.
- Sixteen percent of the Core population qualify as secular Jews.
- One in three Jewish households is affiliated with a synagogue.
- One in five participates in Yom Ha'Atzmaut celebrations.
- Forty-four percent of all surveyed house-

holds contribute to a Jewish charity, and one in four contributes to the United Jewish Appeal.

- One in two households of the core population enrolls their children in some form of Jewish education.

PROLOGUE

Genesis

Joseph, the favored son of Jacob, was lost to the Ishmaelites. After he was abandoned by his brothers and sold into slavery, his father, Jacob, rent his clothes and mourned his son. Years later, Joseph was able to find redemption, come back to his people, and become a great leader.

Post World War II

Before World War II, the Jewish community was en route to becoming one of the typical, integrated ethnic groups of America. They appeared to be another success story of the American melting pot, very similar to that of the Italians, the Germans, the Swedes, and many others. It was the horror of the Holocaust that delayed this integration and united American Jewry. The memory of the Holocaust also became the most significant force and rallying cry for the creation of a Jewish State. This Jewish State then became the centrality of Jewish life, and a series of programs and organizations dedicated to maintaining the security and stability of the State of Israel were created. During the last decade, we have seen the decline of this support in terms of the amount of dollars directed to Israel and in the increasing public criticism of Israeli policies by American Jews and Jewish organizations.

The 1980s

Operation Solomon: the spine tingles! Operation Moses: how we rallied to the cause. Operation Exodus: we gave, we borrowed, we sacrificed. Yet, while we were occupied with these honorable tasks, we lost a generation.

The 1990s

Now is the time to rescue our own American Jewish youth; now is the time for Operation Joseph.

OPERATION JOSEPH

If we have learned anything from the 1990 NJPS, it is the simple fact that a significant number of American Jews do not maintain effective connections to qualitative communal Jewish life. Future projections will be even more dismaying if we do not instill a new sense of belonging and purpose in our youth. This generation of youth and the next will have extensive choices of affiliation and volunteerism within and without the Jewish community. No other generation of Jews will have such a wide variety of options available to them, nor will any be romanced so aggressively for their charitable dollars. If we do not reverse this trend, such future decisions will be made by individuals who lack knowledge, Jewish pride, and a sense of community.

Several premises underlie the tenets of Operation Joseph:

- *Unless we begin to allocate large sums to increasing and enhancing programs dedicated to youth, there will be a further decline of committed Jews involved in our communities:* No accurate statistics are available on resources now directed to youth programs within the Jewish community. We do know that, of 175 Jewish Community Centers (JCCs) in the United States and Canada, only 39 currently have full-time positions of teen director or youth director. CJF statistics

only isolate dollars allocated to local and regional Hillels—\$922,000 in 1990.

- *Unless we become involved in kindling within youth a passion for and identity to Israel, we will witness a further erosion of support to Israel:* Born in the depression, my generation experienced a childhood during the war years, and an adolescence with the horrors of the Holocaust revealed. In early adulthood we celebrated the birth of Israel; no school could have instilled within us the experiential pride and deep connection to Israel that burned within us. With that ember firmly implanted in our hearts, the flame could rage uncontrolled at the slightest provocation. During the War of Independence, the Six-Day War, and the Yom Kippur War, our hearts literally stopped as we awaited the early news. Uncontrolled tears of joy ran down our faces as we celebrated the victories.

Simcha Dinitz, chairman of the Jewish Agency, has called for a goal of 100,000 Jewish youth to visit Israel each year. We must accept his challenge. In 1991, 12,000 of 600,000 American Jewish youth aged 15-19 visited Israel. If this rate continues, then we can assume that nine of ten youth will enter young adulthood with no direct exposure to a vibrant Israel.

- *Unless we involve Jewish youth in the political process, they will lose the opportunity to communicate effectively with government leadership:* Active participation in the political process has been a significant part of American Jewish life. Because of the assimilation of American Jews in the last three decades, this political involvement has become very sophisticated. Yet, a 1992 study commissioned by the Synagogue Council of America shows that one in five American Jewish adults is currently not registered to vote. Most of the unregistered voters are under the age of 35, whereas Jews in their twenties are three times as unlikely as those in their

sixties to be unregistered. If this trend continues, we can anticipate the loss of a significant voice in the political process. Operation Joseph must include programs to educate Jewish youth about the political process and to involve them in that process.

- *Unless we involve Jewish youth in meaningful UJA campaign experiences and provide opportunities for them to accept the importance of community agencies, we will see a rapid erosion of contributors, solicitors, and agency leadership:* A recent study by the American Jewish Committee, "Organizational Affiliation of American Jews" by Drs. Renae Cohen and Sherry Rosen, showed that American Jews generally have high regard for those involved in Jewish communal affairs but that the level of commitment is not very deep. A deep commitment must begin with knowledge and then be honed by experience. Our communities are rich with agencies pulsating with stories and real people that can energize youth if we create opportunities for them to be involved with these agencies.

These opportunities will not develop by themselves. They must be part of a finely turned plan that operates within a nourishing environment, staffed by knowledgeable professionals who are prepared to be challenged and are able to respond to the probing questions that these experiences will provoke. Programs for the next generation of communal leaders must create bridges between information, involvement, and commitment.

- *Unless we develop a cadre of exceptional career youth workers finely honed in their craft, we will continue to operate from hunch to happenstance, with no opportunity to learn from the best and from previous failed efforts:* Currently, our local communities and our national organizations train teachers, social planners, fund raisers, membership directors, executive directors, physical education spe-

cialists, comptrollers, and other communal professionals. However, pitiful sums are allocated to the ongoing training of youth workers.

I propose OPERATION JOSEPH as an effort to rescue future generations of Jews and create new, informed constituencies for our agencies, our synagogues, and our communities. OPERATION JOSEPH will provide opportunities for young people to deal with their identity conflicts and their cultural ambivalences. OPERATION JOSEPH will *expand* the definition of Jewish education as it is currently known within most Jewish communities. Experiential education will become the focal point; discussion based on encounter will become the formal classroom. *Under no circumstances should OPERATION JOSEPH replace any efforts to enhance formal educational programs within Jewish schools, synagogues, and homes.*

OPERATION JOSEPH RESCUE PLAN 1: THE EMERGENCY CAMPAIGN

Every community will conduct its annual campaigns with a new line added to the campaign goals. This new line, "OPERATION JOSEPH," will be similar to those added during the campaigns devoted to Operation Exodus and Operation Moses. The objective will be to create a community endowment fund equal to 50% of the annual UJA objective. Gifts will be payable over 5 years. The annual income of this fund will subsidize new programs dedicated to youth.

The rescue of American Jewish youth will require a massive effort by our local and national communities. It will not be accomplished with the dollars currently allocated to this purpose nor with the addition of a few new workers. The funding of this project must demand the same financial planning that went into the effort to bring hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews to Israel and to America. We must be as meticulous in our planning as in rescuing 15,000 Ethiopian Jews in one day.

Therefore, a third-line campaign, providing restricted funds exclusively for OPERATION JOSEPH programs, is necessary. The excitement and ambitious nature of this project should also attract designated endowment funds, and it is hoped that initial seed money for several lead communities will be provided by major Jewish foundations.

OPERATION JOSEPH RESCUE PLAN 2: COMMUNITY YOUTH DEPARTMENTS

Each community will create a department of youth, under the supervision of one of the quality agencies of the community. If there is no such agency, supervision and coordination can be centralized within the federation.

This Department of Youth will plan and coordinate a series of programs combining activities related to *Tikkun Olam* and *Pikuach Nefesh* with appropriate adolescent recreation and leadership development activities. It will make its professional resources available to all youth programs in the community—whether in JCCs, synagogues, bureaus of Jewish education, Zionist organizations, or B'nai B'rith. These resources will be available for upgrading programs, leader training, and community-wide events. Membership requirements should be minimized, fees made affordable, and when necessary, scholarships should be made available to youth from low-income families.

OPERATION JOSEPH RESCUE PLAN 3: TRAINING YOUTH WORKERS

National training programs for staff engaged in youth work will be conducted regionally and nationally. Participants in these local and national training institutes will study and create program models that can be replicated in local communities, as well as programs that will add momentum to the creation of a Jewish National Youth Movement. Collaborative training programs will be provided for teachers, JCC

youth workers, synagogue youth workers, etc. By combining these training opportunities we will see models of programs that blend the unique characteristics of each institution and the expansive skills of the professional youth staff.

The net result of these ongoing training institutes will be the development of a cadre of highly trained workers with the skills and knowledge to move from cognitive to experiential, from sports to counseling, from individual needs to group needs, with full knowledge of the opportunities each skill provides and understanding of the limitations of their pandemic skills.

OPERATION JOSEPH RESCUE PLAN 4: INVOLVEMENT IN UJA AND COMMUNITY

Each community will create within its campaign structure a division with the purpose of soliciting targeted youth in the community for donations. This division will recruit leadership from within the youth community to develop its campaign literature and public relations, as well as to plan all youth campaign functions. Programs will be designed to involve and connect young people to their communities, educate them in the missions of communal agencies, and involve them in the UJA process. These programs will provide innovative opportunities that link donations to services, professional to volunteer, and local to national and international.

OPERATION JOSEPH RESCUE PLAN 5: THE ISRAEL CONNECTION

Using Operation Joseph funds, every Jewish community will allocate \$1000 in the name of every Jewish teenager on his or her thirteenth birthday. This money can be withdrawn by the teens on their sixteenth, seventeenth, or eighteenth birthday as partial payment toward an approved Israel trip program. Affluent members of the community who require no subsidy can place this allocation into a fund for those with financial

needs. Teens who still cannot afford the program can be assigned work projects at JCCs, federations, or through a Job Opportunities for Youth Bank (JOY) created by community leaders.

Yet, the trip can only be one component of a connecting process. Pre-trip and post-trip programs are essential to firmly plant the seeds of positive lifetime attitudes and relationships to Israel. These programs must also connect the Israel experience to the local community and provide avenues of communal dialogue with opportunities for involvement and expression. On return from the Israel trip the teenager must enroll in a community youth leadership program, which includes projects of *tikkun olam*, community service, and participation in the UJA youth program.

OPERATION JOSEPH RESCUE PLAN 6: YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Each community will put into effect a leadership development program for youth. These programs will have a graded curriculum, so that over a span of 3 to 4 years a teenager will be able to enroll in sequential programs and institutes and ultimately earn a designated title that will have national significance and status—similar to the Wexner Fellows, key societies, MacArthur fellowships, etc. These programs will be conducted within existing networks of youth affiliation, such as synagogue youth groups, B'nai B'rith Youth Organization (BBYO), Zionist youth groups, BJs, and JCCs and with counselors at resident camps and day camps, etc. These groups will develop leadership and group relations skills that will be used in projects benefitting their own agencies and communities.

OPERATION JOSEPH RESCUE PLAN 7: NATIONAL PROGRAMS

National programs will be conducted to bring together youth from across the country. One current example is the JCC North American Maccabi Games. Other models

that must be continued and expanded are the JCC Association Leadership Mission to Washington (in Canada to Ottawa) and The March of The Living. These models must be enhanced and increased to include the arts, intellectual endeavors, and exchange visits. Extensive planning on the local level is needed to create continuous year-round programs that relate these national and international programs to local issues and to the work of local agencies.

A series of national leadership development programs will be conducted to bring outstanding teen leaders together to continue these binding efforts. These programs will also include skill development in communications.

OPERATION JOSEPH RESCUE PLAN 8: COMMUNICATIONS

National media vehicles that provide ongoing information to youth must be created. This effort will include an expansion of the JCC Association's *Teenscene*, as well as the creation of satellite conferences and video workshops that will develop programs for inclusion within a nationally planned utilization of public access television.

Each community will be equipped with modern communication systems and will train youth to operate these systems.

OPERATION JOSEPH RESCUE PLAN 9: THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Local youth collaborations must be established with the American Israel Political Action Committee (AIPAC), the Center on Mid-East Studies, community relation councils (CRCs), and other influential organizations to create programs that will educate our youth about the value of involvement in the political process. They must be encouraged to speak out on important issues. On the local level can be provided voter registration programs and those that debate the issues and provide opportunities to meet and question political candidates and elected officials. Programs of action within

their own communities and within the local Jewish political system must also be encouraged.

OPERATION JOSEPH PLAN 10: COMMUNITY RELATIONS

If we are to succeed in bringing young people into the mainstream of Jewish community life, this effort must be done within the context of American society. It must not be isolated from the important issues affecting America today. Well-intentioned, politically active youth must see their role in the entire political spectrum, rather than merely in regard to Jewish issues. American Jewish youth do not want to be isolated within the Jewish community, but at this time do not have the knowledge, the pride, or the commitment to effectively create strong anchors to the Jewish community while building bridges to the greater society. Thus, our challenge in community relations will be to provide information on societal problems within an acceptable Jewish framework so that our youth will be able to engage in intellectual debate and discussion with other ethnic groups and individuals on campus, in their neighborhoods, and within their communities.

This project must be undertaken in a Jewish world that sees the Diaspora as a vi-

able future for world Jewry. Young people today will reject the concept of Israel solely as an ingathering homeland for all Jews. They must be able to understand the value and concept of Israel as the centrality of world Jewry without rejecting their own country.

CONCLUSION

OPERATION JOSEPH will focus on the vitality of the Jewish self within our communities. It will help young people probe their own lives and their communities while we supply them with the knowledge and the opportunity to improve their lives, build communities based on moral example, and participate effectively in their political systems. They will not be followers of change, but rather the creative minds for change.

During the next decade, American youth will have to redefine the American dream. The economic reversal of the 1990s has redefined the career ladders of the last 40 years. While American Jewish youth are grappling with these new economic realities, OPERATION JOSEPH will have firmly implanted in them a strong Jewish communal identity that will provide the leadership to withstand the trials and tribulations of Jewish life in the next century.