

# A Jewish Philosophy for the JCC Movement—

An Invitation to a Discussion  
on Jewish Peoplehood,  
Pluralism, Living,  
and Learning

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*I firmly believe that any organization, in order to survive and achieve success, must have a sound set of beliefs on which it premises all its policies and actions. Next, I believe that the most important single factor in corporate success is faithful adherence to these beliefs.*

*—Thomas Watson, Jr.*

*A Business and Its Beliefs: The Ideas  
That Helped Build IBM*

## **Background: JCC Philosophy Over Time**

**S**hould the Jewish Community Centers in North America adopt an explicit “Jewish philosophy?” To what extent are elements of a JCC Jewish philosophy already in place? What would be its implications? What would it look like? This document aims to encourage JCC leaders to intensify their discussions of these and related questions. For it seems that recent changes in JCCs around the continent, as well as in North American Jewry, are demanding attention to issues of philosophy, values, and ideology.

Among the key developments that have characterized JCCs over the last few years, two are especially relevant for our concerns here. First, some leading figures have begun to speak about shaping JCCs into a “movement,” fully recognizing the ambiguity of the term and aware, as well, of its novelty. Second, JCCs have increasingly emphasized Jewish education in their mission and program, albeit with considerable variation across the continent. Both developments would seem to point to the need for a clearer and more explicit statement of JCC Jewish philosophy than has been offered heretofore.

Articulating a Jewish philosophy for the JCC movement is clearly a daunting task. Some observers might question whether one can properly speak of a Jewish Community Center “philosophy.” Perhaps such words as mission, ideology, vision,

approach, or perspective might be more appropriate. To avoid getting stuck on a question of definition, for purposes of this discussion, this paper utilizes a modest understanding of JCCs' Jewish philosophy. At bare minimum, it will embrace a set of related beliefs, values, and priorities regarding the contemporary condition of North American Jewry, and how JCCs ought to respond to that condition. In other words, parallel with other philosophies, this one ought to contain an analysis and a prescription, i.e., what is wrong (or right), and what should we do about it? If properly conceived, a JCC Jewish philosophy should lend meaning to the mission of JCCs; it should guide JCC leadership in policy, program, and practice; it should clarify the Jewish stance of the JCC; and, as a fortuitous by-product, it should help both insiders and outsiders better understand and appreciate the value and significance of JCCs. Also for purposes of this discussion, this paper focuses only on that aspect of JCC institutional philosophy that directly touches upon its Jewish educational and cultural mission. Other aspects of JCC philosophy may be crucial for situating the Jewish aspect, but the current concern here is exclusively with what may be called, "the Jewish piece."

### **The JCC Past as Prologue**

Over the years, Jewish Community Centers have indeed displayed a distinctive stance toward Jewish life. Some may call that stance a philosophy, and others may not. Yet, whatever it is, some aspects have remained constant and some have clearly changed over time. Both the constant elements and the changing elements of JCC philosophy, such as it may be, can be made evident when we consider the three distinct periods to which historians of the JCC phenomenon commonly refer. In the earliest period, from the time of their inception and continuing up to roughly the beginning of World War II, JCCs (and their predecessor settlement houses) sought primarily to smooth the Americanization and integration of Jewish immigrants and their children. The next period saw JCCs evolve into suburban centers of Jewish recreation and association, albeit with a declared, but largely unfulfilled, commitment to a distinctively Jewish mandate and character. And, most recently, perhaps only in the last decade or so, that mid-century model of the JCC seems to have run its course. In the last few years, a new conception of the Jewish Community Center has begun to emerge, one distinguished by an increased emphasis on the peculiarly Jewish mission of the JCC.

In unprecedented ways, leading JCCs have vastly increased their commitment to Jewish education.

Throughout all three periods of their existence, JCCs have displayed certain value constants, of which four elements seem most apparent: inclusiveness, comprehensiveness, multi-dimensionality, and responsiveness. Inclusiveness refers to the commitment of JCCs to reach out to Jewish population groups sometimes seen as peripheral to the conventional Jewish community, be they immigrants in one generation, or the intermarried in another. Comprehensiveness refers to the commitment to providing a full span of services geared to each stage of life, from young childhood to the elder years. Multi-dimensionality refers to the combination of services and programs JCCs typically undertake to address a wide range of needs and interests. Finally, responsiveness refers to the highly adaptable, market-oriented nature of JCCs that leads them to modify their program in line with the changing character of their constituencies.

If these are the constant elements of JCCs' philosophy, then there are variable elements as well. Another way of looking at this phenomenon is to say that, over time, the functional application of the constant principles has led to changing emphases in line with the changing character of North American Jewry. Thus, each of the three major periods in the history of North American Jewish Community Centers saw significant changes in the essence or the application of what might be called the JCC institutional philosophy.

In the earliest period of Americanization, JCCs advanced a program of acculturation. They perceived that Jews needed to become fully participating Americans (something that, whatever their differences, both poorer immigrant Jews and wealthier, established American Jews — and non-Jews — agreed upon). The new Americans of the time were to be helped to adapt to the challenges of living in a new society, far different from the ones in Eastern Europe they had just left. They were to become committed to the values of democracy, embracing such notions as civic responsibility, tolerance, and self-reliance.

Underlying these views was an analysis of Jews and their relationship to American society. (This analysis can be extended, with some modification, to Canada as well.) To former European Jews, America represented a hope not merely for prosperity, but for genuine freedom and acceptance. However, the necessary pre-condition for this acceptance was that Jews learn to shed their foreign ways and fully adopt to their new, modern, tolerant, voluntaristic society. So as not to give cause either for the

emergence of American anti-Semitism, or for legislative restrictions against further immigration of Jews from abroad, the new immigrants would need to avoid placing a burden on the larger society and avoid constituting a public nuisance. The early settlement houses represented the attempt by established American Jews to achieve what their immigrant counterparts so fervently sought in any event: to thoroughly Americanize. In this understanding, JCCs indeed reflected and addressed the most widespread concerns of the larger Jewish community at the time.

In mid-century, especially after World War II, young adult Jews left the cities and flocked to the newly built suburbs. As they did so, they underwrote numerous new synagogues and JCCs as well. JCCs, at this time, came to express and foster the value of Jewish association. Associationalism (as we later came to call it) emphasized the joy and virtue of Jews living and playing together, at a time long before observers would speak of threats to Jewish continuity. The mid-twentieth century was a time when Jews perceived discrimination in the larger society, and when many of them simply preferred the company of other Jews who shared similar class background and cultural experiences. The notion that Jews would need to struggle to preserve their group character seemed distant, indeed. Rather, Jews were struggling to assure their acceptance by other North Americans, and until that day came, they sought each other as co-workers, neighbors, friends, and spouses. At a time of significant Jewish residential concentration, the JCC served as an extension of the Jewish neighborhood (rather than its surrogate, as it would later on), and it provided a meeting ground for pre-existing Jewish social networks (rather than feeling responsible for building them). Notwithstanding the blandishments of the Janowsky Report (1948), JCCs paid only lip service to their frequently declared mission of providing a truly rich Jewish cultural and educational environment. Simply supplying an enjoyable context for Jews of various ages and backgrounds to gather seemed to most JCC leaders to fulfill their responsibilities in the specifically Jewish arena.

Then, at a point in time that some might locate somewhere in the 1980s (the COMJEE process started officially in 1982), JCC leaders (along with some forward thinking North American Jews) began to understand that associationalism alone would hardly suffice to successfully bring Jews, Judaism, and Jewishness into the 21st century. No longer was anti-Semitism so widespread that Jews were rejected as colleagues, neighbors, friends, intimates, and spouses. By the 1980s, almost all younger adult North American Jews had attended university, and most had succeeded in obtaining graduate degrees. Coupled with the emergence of a fourth generation North American Jew, few felt genuinely insecure or uncomfortable in the company of non-Jews. Indeed the very success of the earlier efforts to Americanize and integrate Jews, as well as efforts to combat anti-Semitism, would come to

present a new threat to what has been called, "Jewish continuity."

As they have in the past, JCCs responded to the changing needs of the changing environment, in this case, by more strongly emphasizing the distinctively Jewish purpose in their mandate. Changes can be seen in personnel, programs, and policies. But JCCs have yet to fully elaborate the modifications in their philosophy to reflect this latest round of newly emerging conditions and demands. In a sense, the reality changed on the ground before the conceptions and perceptions changed in people's minds.

The time may well be opportune for a new conceptualization to catch up with the new JCC realities, directions, and aspirations. It is time for volunteer and professional leaders to engage in a broad-ranging discussion aimed at delineating the JCCs' institutional philosophy to make it more consistent with the increased emphases on things Jewish in North American Jewish Community Centers. Such a philosophy should satisfy two criteria. First, it should organically emerge out of the many common themes that now characterize the most Jewishly committed JCCs in North America. Second, it should serve to propel JCCs forward to a better understanding of their educational mission, both among insiders and outsiders alike.

### **Why JCCs Need a Clearer Jewish Philosophy**

The evolution of a more clearly articulated Jewish philosophy among North American Jewish Community Centers would simultaneously address a number of issues.

First, merely discussing the objectives of JCCs' Jewish mission—even if it produces no concrete results or continental agreement—would serve to heighten both the sophistication and the visibility of JCCs' engagement in Jewish education and programming, a worthy goal in its own right.

Second, insofar as volunteer and professional leaders of JCCs across North America come to adopt a common language, engage in a common conversation, and, in time come to adopt common perspectives, the aspiration of coalescing a "movement" out of disparate JCCs, operating under varying conditions across a huge continent becomes more realizable. A common Jewish approach alone hardly suffices to construct a movement; but, at the same time, the construction of a movement seems to demand a clear Jewish philosophy, or at least something approximating one.

Third, a clearer Jewish philosophy would serve to lend structure and meaning to JCCs' Jewish educational enterprise, thereby further encouraging policy makers, practitioners and donors to support such efforts. If people have a better sense of what they are

doing, and why their efforts are so important, they are simply more likely to work harder, longer, and with more enthusiasm at such efforts.

Fourth, a clearer Jewish philosophy would help shape Jewish educational programs in JCCs. Currently, no one can deny the proliferation of Jewish educational programs in a large number of JCCs in North America. However, it is doubtful that many of these programs can be regarded as constituting a strategically informed, thoughtfully structured effort to bring about a clearly defined set of changes in local Jewish populations. Indeed, moving from individual programs to an integrated educational strategy represents the next significant challenge to the most high-achieving JCCs. A coherent Jewish philosophy may be a necessary instrument in the development of a strategic approach.

Fifth, a clear articulation of JCC Jewish educational objectives has immediate implications for practice. It will inform and influence the numerous day-to-day decisions taken by front-line and supervisory staff. Management experts report positive outcomes when workers truly understand and incorporate the philosophy of the corporations for which they work. When confronted with the need to make decisions "on the ground," such workers have less need to turn to supervisors for advice and can instead correctly address problems on their own. To take a concrete example in the JCC context: Is it the pre-school director's responsibility to advocate the maximal, feasible intensive form of Jewish education for her youngsters after pre-school, or is her responsibility fulfilled simply by fairly presenting alternative choices in Jewish education? Or, does she have no responsibility whatsoever in this area? Currently all three models—and more—characterize current practice. A clear philosophy could provide an answer to these questions; although, conceivably, different JCCs might arrive at different ideological conclusions.

Sixth, the evolution of a Jewish educational approach can only serve to verify to influential outsiders (other agencies, other Jewish communal leaders) the sophistication and dedication of the JCC movement to the Jewish educational agenda. For all their efforts over the last two decades in particular, JCCs have yet to achieve the recognition JCC leaders feel they deserve for their deeper commitment to Jewish education. The articulation and adoption of a Jewish philosophy for the JCCs would make the entire Jewish educational effort more understandable, more visible, and, ultimately, more respected. JCCs, especially as they enrich their specifically Jewish elements, embody a dimension of the Jewish experience in North America, yet to be fully understood, described, or appreciated.



Finally, so long as JCCs engage in the Jewish educational arena, they acquire the opportunity (or, some may say, the responsibility) to advocate their particular approach to Jewish life, Judaism, and Jewishness. Orthodoxy, Conservatism, Reform, Reconstructionism, Zionism, Jewish feminism, etc. all serve to make for a richer, healthier Jewish community. Cannot the same be said for the interpretation of Judaism now implicitly resident within the Jewish Community Center movement? Alternatively, should not JCCs aspire to embody an approach to Jewish life that they are proud to advocate outside their boundaries?

If the JCCs have something special to say about the way in which Jews should live their lives and conduct their communities, then it behooves them to identify that message, clarify it, and advocate on its behalf. If nothing else, such a development would lend JCC leaders—both lay and professional—a certain moral authority that they now lack. After all, only if JCCs project their Jewish mission beyond serving as a focus and locus of Jewish association, can their leaders speak with authority about the major challenges facing contemporary Jewish life. When JCCs begin to be widely seen as standing for something bigger than themselves, when they aspire to a sort of Jewish greatness, even if they occasionally fall short in the here-and-now, then their leaders can more readily be seen as legitimately taking part in the shaping of Judaism and the Jewish community of tomorrow.

### **Cautions About "Ideology"**

At the same time it is important to mention some cautions about Jewish philosophies or ideologies. First, one of the strengths of JCCs has been their inclusiveness; JCCs are institutions that welcome all Jews regardless of their ideologies. The imposition of a narrow set of Jewish perspectives could threaten that inclusiveness by making some Jews feel less welcome. Second, the starting point of Jewish Community Centers is the concern for people and their needs. In contrast, we can become overly concerned with beliefs and world views. Third, commitment to a Jewish philosophy works well when there is a total commitment of staff and lay leaders to a particular belief system. JCCs abide very diverse professional and lay leadership. Without their substantial commitment to a particular Jewish philosophy, it is likely to have little impact. Fourth, it is not totally clear that American Jewish life needs a new "ideology" or philosophy of Jewish life. Several important and well-defined religious denominations offer

clear perspectives on Judaism, and their existence may preclude the need for yet another position. Indeed, over-ideologizing the JCC movement may rob it of its very uniqueness. Fifth, it might prove difficult to arrive at a sharply defined JCC Jewish philosophy. JCC leaders exhibit little unanimity today as to what "Judaism" is, or what the correct Jewish ideology might be. All we might end up with is platitudes or fights. Finally, concern for ideology may be the bailiwick of certain kinds of people or movements; in contrast, JCCs are ultimately about actually running programs, responding to needs, and serving Jews.

Our suggestion that now is the time for JCCs to think more seriously about philosophical or ideological issues should be heard in light of our recognition of these reservations. We believe that the JCC movement should begin to reflect much more seriously on its inherent value perspectives; however, at the same time, it should not sacrifice its people focus, its diversity, and its action orientation. We are suggesting that JCCs should continue with the best of the JCC world view, while becoming more involved in the debate about underlying Jewish values and beliefs. Perhaps we are suggesting that JCCs continue their historic and authentic concern for responding to the needs of "Jews," while also focusing on the values and the call of "Judaism." JCCs should serve both the needs of Jews and the principles of Judaism.

### **Jewish Peoplehood and Pluralism, Jewish Living and Learning— The Core of JCCs' Jewish Philosophy**

For years, JCCs have implicitly offered a Jewish philosophy. Two key features stand out. First, JCCs have sought to enhance the ties of the Jew to the local community, to continental Jewry, to Israel, and to world Jewry. The recent ventures into what some may regard as religious Jewish education do not belie the fact that JCCs have, over time, been seen as exponents of the ethnic and the peoplehood dimensions of Judaism. They have stood for Jews helping other Jews meet the challenge of re-shaping their identities; for Jews enjoying cultural, recreational, educational, and social activities with other Jews; for Jews seeing themselves as part of a larger collective entity on several levels (locally, nationally, and globally); and, by extension and as a dimension unto itself, for Jews enjoying a special relationship with the people and culture of Israel. JCCs have excelled as purveyors and arenas of Jewish culture, as demonstrated in Jewish book months, Jewish art fairs, concerts, dance, theater, and related classes.

Some thread ties all these pieces together, some theme runs through all of these diverse commitments found in JCCs widely separated in both space and time. For want of a better term, all these may be subsumed under a rubric we may call, "Jewish Peoplehood."

At the same time, JCCs pride themselves on their Jewish inclusivity, their ability to reach out to Jews of widely varying characteristics, and their tendency to serve as a meeting ground for the major ideological streams of Judaism. The welcoming, uncritical stance of JCCs to all Jews, regardless of background, has been understood as the embodiment of "pluralism." In point of fact, this stance ought to be seen as preliminary to pluralism, but not sufficient in and of itself. Rather, pluralism demands not only that individuals find acceptance, but that competing ideological streams find expression. Some JCCs, indeed, have taken pains to encourage the expression of major strains of Jewish life in their programs and on their premises.

However one defines pluralism, it is clear that some version of pluralism characterizes the JCC philosophy of Jewish life and Jewish education that is still developing and emerging. As the late David Dubin wrote:

Pluralism is defined as a social condition in which disparate religious, ethnic, racial, and political groups are part of a common community and live together harmoniously, enriched by their differences. . . Unlike the melting pot theory that sought to deny differences, pluralism defines democracy as the right to be different. . . Our [JCCs] embody this principle in both faith and action. . . We are committed to help [Jews] find opportunities for personal and spiritual growth within a Jewish environment that unites and binds through memory and tradition, that differentiates between disagreement and dissent, that invites inclusiveness even as it accepts difference and separation.

Peoplehood and pluralism are complementary elements of the JCC world view. Peoplehood embraces such notions as the kinship of Jews everywhere, their common origins, and common destiny. It emphasizes that Jews are a collective of people with a rich and diverse culture that has grown and developed over the ages. This culture encompasses (among other things): normative values and behaviors; music and art; customs and folkways; literature; thought; myths and heroes. Certain elements of Jewish culture have been shared by Jews across time and space, e.g., great books, prayer, the love of Zion. Other elements of Jewish culture have been particular to dif-

ferent sub-groupings of the Jewish people, e.g., styles of prayer, food, folkways. Peoplehood also evokes notions of mutual caring and responsibility. The understanding that Jews constitute a people, something other than merely a group sharing a common religion, is a fundamental element in Zionism, and a powerful argument for the Diaspora's investment in Israel.

The pluralism component shares with peoplehood a call for inclusiveness. But, it both presupposes and respects the major alternative ways in which Jews define their understanding of their Jewish tradition, culture, norms, and obligations. Certain things have united Jews throughout the ages. At the same time, certain issues, symbols, customs and beliefs have been the cause of controversies. Jewish life embraces a tradition of discussion, disagreement, and diversity. Jewish pluralism has never meant that "anything goes," or that everything Jews do is regarded as Jewish. Rather, it has implied certain broad boundaries, within which Judaism encompasses and perhaps even welcomes a diversity of views. The issue of pluralism has become accentuated in twentieth century Jewish life, owing to the emergence of some clearly distinct and opposing expressions of Judaism. The State of Israel has accentuated the idea of Jewish diversity since it encompasses many dramatically different ways of being Jewish. At the same time, Israel highlights the need for diverse Jews to learn to live together.

## **Jewish Living**

The values of Jewish peoplehood and pluralism focus on key values related to the Jewish people. At the same time, Judaism also encompasses some basic underlying values. Two such values that are inherent and consistent with the JCC world view are Jewish living and Jewish learning.

"Jewish Living" is the notion of Judaism as a normative lifestyle, a way of living, a pattern of behaviors. The Hebrew word *halakha* is often understood as referring to dictates or mandates as to what a Jew must do (as law), whereas in fact the word comes from the Hebrew verb *lalekhet*, which means "to go." What *halakha* actually suggests is that Judaism is not simply an abstract system of beliefs or philosophies, but is ultimately a very practical system that comes to guide how we live our lives in the daily routine. It is about how we live, how we take care of our bodies, how families spend time together, how we care for people of all ages. In suggesting the notion of Jewish living, we clearly are not suggesting that JCCs should teach, preach, or assert

one specific halacha or one way of behaving Jewishly. Instead, we are suggesting that JCCs begin to become voices affirming the notion that being Jewish is about some kind of unique lifestyle. It is not only—or primarily—about what one feels, but about what one does. “Feeling Jewish” is a good start, but only as a prelude to “doing Jewish,” i.e., a way of living in which we translate the great ideas into a pattern of daily behavior and living. Jewish lifestyle has traditionally included home ritual, synagogue ritual, and personal ritual, with implications for one’s life as a member of a family, community, and society. Jewish living also includes moral and ethical values, i.e., it pertains to our relations with our fellow human beings.

### **Jewish Learning**

The concept of Talmud Torah has been an indispensable and central principle of Jewish life through the ages; whatever Jews may have disagreed about, they have always agreed about the centrality of Talmud Torah to being Jewish. The assumption behind this value is that it is good and worthwhile for human beings to use their heads in living life, and particularly to read, interpret, and understand the great books of our tradition. Jewish learning (or Talmud Torah) refers to the belief in the importance, value, and inherent worth of knowledge and the mind, and particularly to the study of great Jewish texts. Judaism is a literary tradition which has emphasized the importance of a compendium of great books which includes: the Bible, Talmud, commentaries, prayer books. The learned person has been an ideal or hero in Jewish tradition. Today the compendium of Jewish learning has expanded and in addition to the traditional sources is regarded by many as including: Jewish philosophy, poetry, literature, art, dance, and theater. In this tradition, study in this sense is valuable not to advance one’s professional career nor as a step to higher status, but as a manifestation of the attempt to realize the Divine plan for human life. We believe that JCCs should join in other great institutions of American Jewish life (such as synagogues, yeshivot, day schools, universities) in affirming and exemplifying the centrality of Talmud Torah.

## The Need for Peoplehood and Pluralism

These days, it ought to be obvious that both peoplehood and pluralism are in need of some dedicated attention and tender loving care. On a variety of levels, the peoplehood aspects of North American Jewry are displaying signs of decline. All quantifiable measures of Jewish ethnic cohesion have been eroding. The growing intermarriage rates are not the only such indicator. Others include: declining residential concentration, less frequent in-group friendship, the smaller size and older age of memberships in major Jewish organizations, as well as declining levels of giving in terms of real income to centralized philanthropic campaigns. In addition, younger Jewish adults are far less attached to Israel than the older generation.

The struggle for Jewish pluralism, for mutual tolerance of sharp ideological differences, has been a historic constant in Jewish life, and remains so to this day. Ideological fissures have always characterized vibrant and passionate Jewish communities, and are today expressed primarily in increasing mutual alienation between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Judaism. Of the major ideological streams in North American Judaism, few seem deeply committed to advocating peoplehood and pluralism simultaneously as their chief objectives.

All of this is to suggest that there is a critical value and an important place for systematic advocacy of the principles of peoplehood and pluralism. The JCCs are well positioned to take up this theme as central to their understanding of Jewish life, and to make it their distinctive "calling card" in the wider organized Jewish community.

### Peoplehood, Pluralism, Living, Learning—Too Much, Too Little, or Just Right?

The extent to which our proposal can serve as a useful starting point for the construction of a JCC philosophy depends heavily upon the level of commitment to Jewish education in particular JCCs. JCCs operating with relatively little commitment to the Jewish educational enterprise may see little reason, if any, to adopt any official Jewish position. After all, such a philosophy would make explicit demands upon the volunteer leaders and staff. It sends a message to members that some might find uncomfortable. It sets in motion a process that may lead to distinctions between Jewish and non-Jewish members and users; and, it adds a jarring element to the functioning of departments (e.g., physical education) that are seemingly remote from the

Jewish educational mission. The adoption of a Jewish philosophy provokes discussion and dissension among top lay and professional leaders, adding one more headache for executive directors and presidents on whose shoulders falls the responsibility of moderating tensions and mollifying disgruntled board members. Resistance to undertaking ideological discussions in some JCCs is both understandable and predictable.

On the other hand, some JCCs have moved very far along in defining their Jewish educational style, approaches, techniques, objectives, and philosophy. To leaders and practitioners in such JCCs, the perspective we are suggesting would seem to fall short of the richer, higher standards for Judaism that they have tried to project and inculcate in their JCCs' educational program. After years of developing a language and an educational content that sets high aspirations for Jewish living, they might regard Jewish Peoplehood, Pluralism, Living, and Learning as a cop-out, a diluted and neutered construction of the Judaism they have tried to teach.

A sophisticated and articulate minority of JCC Jewish educators around the continent, in fact, believe that JCCs ought to purvey specifically religious conceptions of Judaism. Our perspective obviously sidesteps that issue. Purveying religious conceptions of Judaism would be conceivable under this rubric, but by no means is the religious world-view (or -views) necessary or primary.

In short, an effort to advance Jewish Peoplehood, Pluralism, Living, and Learning as the centerpiece of an emerging continental JCC philosophy is bound to be attacked from several sides. In the simplest of terms, some may see it as too advanced and too demanding. Still other leaders, for one reason or another, may see it as too primitive, unsophisticated, and compromising.

The response to these anticipated critiques is both principled and pragmatic. From the point of view of principles, Jewish Peoplehood, Pluralism, Living, and Learning may well accurately represent the prevailing stance of the more Jewishly committed JCCs in North America. Pragmatically, although some may avow higher aspirations, seeking a more sophisticated, more demanding, and/or more religious interpretation of JCC philosophy, our proposed formulation may be as far as the movement at this stage is ready to go. It may come to represent a significant advance, if properly understood, and sufficiently elaborated.

## Translating Peoplehood, Pluralism, Living, and Learning into Action— Starting the Conversation

This paper calls for a concerted discussion of JCC philosophy by the most senior volunteer and professional JCC leaders. It is meant to open and not foreclose conversation around the following related questions:

- 1) Should the JCC movement adopt a Jewish value perspective?
- 2) Does Jewish Peoplehood, Pluralism, Living, and Learning capture the essence of a reasonable, workable, and adaptable philosophy for JCCs?
- 3) What are the practical implications of such a philosophy for JCC operations?

As may well be obvious, this document argues (we hope persuasively) for affirmative answers to the first two questions. In other words, we believe the JCC movement requires an explicit Jewish value perspective; and we believe that Jewish Peoplehood and Pluralism, Jewish Living and Learning constitute a reasonable articulation of JCCs' Jewish stance.

Having said all that, we leave open the question of implementation. What would the adoption of this philosophy mean for the mission and operation of the local JCC? What are its implications for specific program areas, be they camping, early childhood education, adult education, or any of a number of others? And, finally, how can JCC Association help the field engage in a serious consideration of this proposal and its practical implications? How ought JCC Association advance sophisticated thinking about how to translate this Jewish philosophy into action? These are not the only questions to emerge from this document; but they are certainly among the most important and the most urgent.

Indeed, a sense of urgency is at the heart of our call to thought and action. For years, JCCs could deservedly take pride in the extent to which they were responsive to the changing needs and tastes of the Jewish population they have served. But, for all its virtue, "responsive" ultimately carries a reactive connotation. Jews changed and JCCs changed as a result. If the recent past is any guide, the years ahead will produce changes at a pace that will be much more rapid than that experienced heretofore. To remain both competitive and institutionally sound, JCCs will need to develop a *raison d'être* that truly expresses the words "Jewish" and "Community" that comprise the key parts of their name. And, they will need to assure the continuation, if not the expan-



sion, of a public that values Jewish Community.

JCCs can choose to thoughtfully rise to these challenges, to get ahead of the curve of change—or not. We would argue that only a proactive stance, accompanied by the adoption of an articulate yet flexible Jewish philosophy, will secure the future of JCCs and, indeed, will help strengthen North American Jewry as well. In short, JCCs can choose to anticipate change, provide for an increasingly competitive environment, and enrich their population of clients and supporters. Alternatively, they can decide to wait for change to become apparent, react (perhaps too late), and hope that forces beyond them will assure the continuity of a population committed to living in a Jewish community. Making these difficult decisions, and implementing them, is clearly the province of JCC leadership, both volunteer and professional. And that, ultimately, is both the privilege of leadership, and its responsibility as well.



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COHEN AND CHAZAN • A JEWISH PHILOSOPHY FOR THE JCC MOVEMENT—  
AN INVITATION TO A DISCUSSION ON JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD, PLURALISM, LIVING, AND LEARNING