

**Forging Links:
The Jewish
Community Center
Builds
Jewish Community**

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At 1982 Biennial Convention,

Chicago, IL, May 14



Interdependence and Community

"The talmudic judgement, 'all Jews are responsible for one another, does not merely record a sentiment; rather it describes a character of the covenantal commitment.' (Shevuot 39A)¹

This commitment to interdependence is center to being Jewish. The rite of passage from one lifestage to another, whether it be the brit, the marriage, or the kaddish, requires a minyan—a communal experience. This is not only a matter of religious practice, but also reflects the interdependence of all Jews. This commitment constantly reminds us that responsibility for one another is not a private matter, but one that finds expression through *activity* with other Jews. This is what we mean when we speak of the *Jewish community*.

That community is made up of a variety of individuals and groups. In order to consider ways in which we can build Jewish community, we will want to take into account how we strengthen individuals, encourage their participation in the Jewish community, and enhance their Jewish identification.

Groupings, especially families, are the cement which binds the community together. Over and above the individuals in these groups, there is a need to insure the community's continuance and to provide those unique functions which will enhance this continuity.

It will help us to understand the relationship of our Jewish community today in the open society in which we live if we pause for a moment to examine the closed society of 300-400 years ago, the *Kehilla*.

In the 1600s and the early 1700s in Central Europe, the *Kehilla* had a distinct legal standing. It was empowered to levy taxes and to impose fines and punishments. Community responsibility encompassed every aspect of life, religious and secular. The individual born into Jewish society at the time would never have given a thought to the possibility of not being part of the Jewish community. There really was no option.

In our own time, the open society has developed so that the present Jewish community is voluntary; it is established by commitment and not by law, and its influence and viability are based on personal, deliberate identification and not on imposed power.

Patterns of Participation

Today, some will readily identify with the community, others on occasion and some not at all. We can compare the patterns of participation to a scale.

In citing this scale, we are not trying to define "who is a Jew." Instead, we attempt to measure the various

¹So1 Roth, *The Jewish Idea of Community*, 1977



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ways in which Jews take part in Jewish communal endeavors. This scale can help us to see more clearly the developments which are needed to encourage and to build this participation in the community.

Participation is an essential building block in Jewish identification which is, in turn, a significant element in building community. At the low end of the scale are Jews who are born of Jewish parents and who even say they are "Jewish." However, little in their behavior is in any way distinctly Jewish. They are not connected with the Jewish community, its synagogues or its institutions. They feel no responsibility to take part in the community campaign. In short, whether or not *they* say that they are Jewish, we would have to say that they are at the low end of the scale. They have either rejected or ignored the Jewishness of their parents. They may be the end product of two or three generations of assimilation.

At the high end of the scale, we find North American Jews who fully accept their Judaism. Their families are active in the community and in its efforts and they are active members of a synagogue. They may or may not see themselves as Zionist, but Israel is important to them; they have visited Israel and support it ideologically; they contribute financially towards its welfare. They recognize that one people needs one language and concur with the idea, at least theoretically, that Jews should know Hebrew.

They recognize that their fate is bound up with other Jews; and they feel keenly the obligation to respond to Jewish needs, locally and worldwide. Very few of us are either at one end of the scale or the other. Most of us are somewhere in between. In order for our Jewish community to survive and flourish, we need to build on the foundations already established and to develop individuals with the tools to continue to build and strengthen it.

The task of the community in general and the Center in particular is to enable people to develop these tools. When we do that, we're strengthening individuals as Jews - individuals who are the building blocks of the Jewish community.

What are the elements in this patient brick-by brick building of Jewish community? How will we go about it? How should the Center be involved and what should its role be in strengthening Jewish identity?

- How will we give added support to Jewish family life?
- How will we connect with the national and world Jewish scene?
- How will we establish closer links to Israel?
- How will we provide for those groups in the community with special needs, such as the aged, the

uncommitted, the unconnected, and the intermarried?

- How will we insure that our community is made up of healthy individuals?
- How will we develop leadership for the future?
- e How will we plan community services and see that they are funded?
- What coalitions will we need in the community?

Let us then examine each of these elements and see the ways, in which the Center can build community.

Jewish Identity

The mortar of our community is *Jewish identity*.

To consider Jewish identity, we must examine Jewish education. First, there is the current status of Jewish education in the classroom:

More children are receiving an *all-day* Jewish education than ever before, but the number of children receiving *any* form of Jewish education has decreased.¹ This is a much more significant drop than the decline in the number of Jewish school-age children. Less than 40 percent of those eligible receive any kind of Jewish education. Think of it, *six* of every 10 Jewish children do not receive any kind of Jewish education. In other words, the committed are becoming more committed; those on the periphery seem to be drifting further away.

"We are all responsible for one another." Whose responsibility is the growing number of young people who are not being exposed to Jewish education in this formal way?

On this subject, I would like to share with you some fascinating results from a recent study,² which found that, even amongst those who are receiving a formal Jewish education, Jewish education *alone* is not sufficient. The study revealed that Jewish identification which, in the ultimate analysis, is what Jewish education attempts to achieve, was more likely to take place in a combination of circumstances in which the Jewish home played its part and the school played its part, and the Jewish experiences of the school were reinforced in other ways.

One element of community building is to seek to provide significant segments of the population with experiences which have the capability of strengthening Jewish identification. Without doubt we need to reach the more than 60 percent of our young people who are not receiving any type of Jewish education. Simul-

² Gerald Bubis, "Journal of Jewish Communal Services," Summer, 1981. *Professional Trends in Jewish Communal Practice in America*. See also: Jewish Telegraphic Agency, Daily News Bulletin, Nov. 7, 1979. *Two-Decade Enrollment Decline in Jewish Schools is Levelling Off*.

³ Dr. Geoffrey Bock, American Jewish Committee= January, 1977. *Does Jewish Schooling Matter?*

taneously, there is a need to reinforce the efforts of our Jewish educational institutions.

Experience has taught that the more knowledgeable people are, the more emotionally bound they are, the more involved they are, the more likely they are to identify with the community. The more people can feel a sense of pride in belonging, the more they will identify. On an even more basic level, and especially important in our open mobile society, the more Jews are able *to come together, to do things together*, the more they will identify.

History making events such as the Six-Day War can, in a short period of time, have a profound impact on the building of community. However, strong community building comes not from screaming headlines but from those things which happen in the quiet, constant events of our everyday lives. It is here that the Jewish Community Center makes a profound contribution.

The Center represents an opportunity both to supplement the work of the more formal Jewish educational institutions, and to provide a primary place for Jewish learning for many of the more than 60 percent of our young people who receive no formal Jewish education. This Jewish education in an informal setting provides many of us the opportunity to become more Jewishly knowledgeable and identified. It does this by providing a range of programs and services designed to be attractive enough to encourage Jews to voluntarily take part and grow. Some of these include:

- Workshops on festivals and Shabbat to encourage family participation
- A Holocaust theme as part of a camp unit
- Challah baking, candlelighting and Sabbath programming in its pre-school nursery school
- An Israeli Expo or festival on a Jewish theme
- A Hebrew conversation ulpan
- A Jewish cultural festival for the community
- A book fair during Jewish Book Month
- A Jewish film festival

These Jewishly oriented programs, the Jewish content in the summer camps, and Jewish family living programs have provided a distinct Jewish focus to the Center. This is not to say that the Center is in competition with the synagogue and with the formal Jewish school. On the contrary, it reinforces and complements the synagogue and school experiences. But more importantly, the Center reaches a significant portion of the community not reached by any other Jewish institutions. The Center becomes the place where the diverse elements of the community come together and, in so doing, build a stronger foundation for the Jewish community. In fact, what is community if it is not to bring people together, to share

common interests and common destiny? In 1982 no one can deny that Israel's existence is a powerful force contributing to the building of the Jewish community.

It is *the* force that most excites Jews today as a means of identifying Jewishly, and it is one of the building blocks of our modern Jewish community. JCCs are intensively involved in programming around Israel. Centers have created Israel Desks so there is one place in the community which can provide information and direction to young people and others to experience Israel.

Centers sponsor groups of teenagers and family groups to visit Israel. These experiences in Israel provide an unparalleled opportunity for the travelers to become inspired to even greater Jewish commitment. Centers have, for many years now, engaged Israeli shlichim to build into local Centers an Israeli resource. Centers, with the aid of the JWB Lecture Bureau, provide their communities with Israeli artists and Israeli cultural events. However, we should also recognize another dimension, another element to these activities. Simply put, we must recognize that Israel is not only a program resource but also a Jewish educational instrument. Through these several connections, these links with Israel, not only are we expressing our sense of Jewish peoplehood; but also building Jewish community between Israel and our North American Jewish communities.

Groups in the Community With Special Needs

Many different components go into a building and it is the same with community building. One of these components is people. People are different. Individual Jews are different. Many have special and even particular needs that require specific attention. The more Centers are responsive to these needs, the more people can be helped to cope effectively, the more community building can occur.

If Jews are a People of the Book, so too are they a people on the go. Ever since the time of Abraham and his move from Babylon to Canaan, *which is now Israel*, Jews have been on the move. Migration has been a regular feature of Jewish life.

One of the larger migrations was the move in the early 1900s from Europe to North America, but the move did not end there. From east to west, from north to south and sometimes back again, Jews have been continually on the move. We now have a wave of migration *within* America. In the south and west, where barely a handful of Jews lived a generation ago, now there are tens of thousands. When looking at this migration we see younger families moving from one place to another every five years, on the average. Centers have responded to this Jewish mobility by welcoming newcomers into their local

communities. There are now discussions on a national level about the most effective way of using the Center network so that those on the move can find an immediate welcome in the new community, picking up with their Jewish activities in the new Center.

Another large group with special needs is the increasing number of aged in our community. It is anticipated that one of every six Jews will be over 65 by the end of the 1980s.⁴

Thirty years ago, the idea of programming for the aged was pioneering. Today we accept it as commonplace. There is not a Center anywhere that does not have an extensive recreational and educational program for its older adults.

There are perhaps 180,000 older adults participating in these programs across the country. Centers have been in the forefront of this community building activity.

The matrix of our varied community institutions reach many Jews. Nevertheless, a majority remain uncommitted and unaffiliated. Many of these otherwise unaffiliated families and individuals who seem in many ways to reject any direct and overt involvement in anything Jewish, do take advantage of the Center. Perhaps due to the atmosphere of voluntarism, perhaps because one can express one's commitment at one's own pace, perhaps because it is not threatening in any way, perhaps because one's behavior won't be judged-for whatever the reasons, the uncommitted do participate in the Center. For many, it is their only connection with anything Jewish,

As I noted earlier, one of the commitments to the interdependence of community is marriage. Jewish community and continuity today are threatened by the increasing rate of intermarriage. The children of these mixed marriages are in particular need of the community's attention. The Center is, in many cases, their one connection with any form of Jewishness. To provide service to these families and to encourage them to take part in Center activities is not to take a position on, or to condone, mixed marriage. Many of these new, young families, by joining the Center and participating in its activities, are saying to us that they want their children to have connection with the Jewish community. With appropriate programs at the Center, they become more strongly identified as Jews. They benefit from participation with more clearly committed families which certainly illustrates the value of the Center as the meeting place of the community.

⁴ *Jewish Week*, N.Y., Nov. 5, 1979. "A 65-year-old man can expect to live until 79, and a woman of the same age can look forward to reaching the statistical average age of 83." *New York Times*, May 7, 1978, quoting Senate Committee on the Aging.

The Center is' therefore responsive to groups with special needs, whether it be the newcomer, the marginal Jew, the aged or the intermarried, and is uniquely equipped to deal with them and to meet their special needs and integrate them into the community. By so doing, the Jewish Community Center builds Jewish community.

Health and Fitness

The obligations of parents to their children are outlined in the Talmud. "The father is bound in respect of his son to circumcise (him), redeem (him, if he is first born), teach him Torah, take a wife for him, and teach him a craft. Some say to teach him to swim, too." (From *One Kiddushin*, Chapter I, 29A).⁵

The maintenance of a Jewish community requires the maintenance of its members' health and well-being. The swimming pools, the running tracks and the post-heart surgery rehabilitation programs at the Center provide the facilities for the maintenance of physical fitness. One can best lead a Jewish life in good health.

In maintaining the health and fitness of the Jewish community, the Center is building community.

Leadership Development

The cement holding the community together are those committed individuals who participate actively in its leadership. The JCC with its board and committee system provides an important vehicle for Jews to determine for themselves the nature and scope of programs and services that will affect their lives and those of others in the community. This builds community by creating a cadre of individuals capable of leading the Jewish community.

If we were to prepare a list of the needs of the organized Jewish community, the development of top leadership would be very close to, if not at, the top of the list. There are countless examples where the ability of communities to move forward in the development of services has depended to a great extent on the availability of both lay and professional leadership.

On a national level, the Centers, through JWB, have articulated that leadership development is a top priority - a priority attested to today by the series of workshops, and the day-long institute held by the JWB New Leadership Committee at this Biennial and the presence of nearly 100 leadership awardees. In addition, a blue ribbon committee on advanced lay leadership has been established to map out an appropriate program to retain veteran leadership in the Center movement.

⁵ Quoted in David Hartman, *Joy and Responsibility*, 1978.

The development of staff and executives has also been given priority on a national level. In addition to the seminars and workshops for staff at all levels, we are now in the midst of a second Executive Development Program which provides an intensive experience for training sub-executive staff to take on the responsibilities of executive management. The first such program, which was held a few years back, has now provided a number of outstanding executives for the field.

On the local level, the Center educates its board and committee members in leadership skills in a number of ways:

- e When it conducts board retreats and board and staff seminars;
- Ⓜ When it provides new board member orientation;
- Ⓜ When it conducts new leadership development programs;
- When it participates with Centers in other communities in regional and national leadership development activities;
- When it provides lay leadership not only for Centers but also for many Federations as well.

In all these ways, the Center is building community.

Strengthening and Supporting Jewish Family Life

We have in the last few years witnessed a startling change in the composition of the typical family. At one point, the family comprised the familiar working father, a stay-at-home mother, and two or more children in the household. Not too many years ago - in the 1950s - this accounted for 70 percent of all households. Single people living alone and single-parent families, etc., all together accounted for only 30 percent.

The figures now appear to be reversed. More than 70 percent of the households are made up of the singles, the divorced, single-parent families, or older people living alone. It has made for a dramatic difference.'

Among the typical families that remain, there has been a dramatic change in the number of mothers who are away from the home. There are now more homes with working mothers than homes with traditional stay-at-home mothers. Recent statistics show that 45 percent of all pre-schoolers have working mothers.

Centers have responded to these developments in family life with innovative changes in their programs for families and children.

The Jewish Community Center strengthens families and builds community when it provides:

- o Programs for the entire family;

- Programs for segments of the family, such as father and son; father and daughter or toddler and mother or father;
- Special workshops to help parents learn how to be parents more effectively;
- Facilities for family camping;
- Jewish family life seminars;
- Big Brother or Big Sister arrangements to ease the burdens of the one-parent family;
- Workshops and seminars for/and with the children of older adults to learn how to cope with an aging parent.

These programs build family and build community.

The Center and Communal Planning and the Community Campaign

The Federation in each community has primary responsibility for the community campaign and for communal planning. The Center is a natural partner. The Center delivers the major portion of service among the Federation family of agencies. Therefore in most communities, it receives the largest amount of communal funds for local service and serves the largest proportion of the Jewish population.

Should there not then be a close working relationship with the Center leadership? Should they not be involved actively in the campaign, encouraged to do so by the Center and the Federation? Similarly, should not the Center leadership be involved in every level of the Federation's communal planning structure?

The involvement and commitment of the Center leadership in the campaign and communal planning builds community.

Coalitions of Agencies Deliver Service

In addition, the Jewish community requires a variety of services which are enhanced when two or more institutions coordinate and/or collaborate in programming:

- When the Center works together with a number of synagogues to provide jointly an adult education program;
- When it develops a health education program with a Jewish hospital;
- When it takes a leadership role in programs in which a variety of agencies take part, such as Israel Walk-A-Thons and Israel Independence Day parades;
- When it provides the staff leadership for a Jewish youth council representing all Jewish youth in the community.

In giving leadership and in working as part of these agency coalitions, it is building Jewish community.

6Danim Yankelovitch. *New Rules - Searching for Self Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down*, 1981

Reinforcing Jewish Connections Nationally and Worldwide

Beyond bringing people in the local community together, the Center serves as a vehicle for reaching to other Jewish communities within North America and worldwide.

The almost instinctive impulse to seek and find common bonds with other communities has been characteristic of Jewish communities throughout history. It is no accident then that our JCCs have come together through their national association of Jewish Community Centers - JWB - to foster and to provide a structure for this sense of common purpose. That this Biennial itself has attracted over 850 of the top leadership of our Jewish Community Centers is in itself a reflection of this impulse. In coming together in this and other ways, our Center leadership express their common concerns and exchange experiences. Whenever we do this, we are building Jewish community.

This same impulse to reach out to kin beyond one's own Jewish community extends to other lands where Jews live. Beyond our North American leadership we are privileged today to have with us Center leaders from around the world - a symbolic statement that the Center is a vehicle for connecting with a Jew in Buenos Aires, a Jew in London, a Jew in Copenhagen and of course a Jew in Jerusalem. For in each of these cities and beyond, the JCC concept has been adapted to meet local needs and conditions. Thus, we are building Jewish community worldwide.

When I visited Israel in 1971, I learned first-hand that several Community Centers had been established along the lines of the Jerusalem YMHA which our own North American Center movement, through JWB, had established as a model some years earlier. Since then, the idea of a Community Center has caught on with enormous vigor. There are now 120 such Centers throughout the length and breadth of Israel - in just about every development town and every disadvantaged neighborhood! *A truly indigenous Israeli happening.* Israelis have apparently considered this to be sufficiently high priority in the past 10 years to provide funds and to pay, as users, for an institution which has obviously demonstrated that when it comes to building community, the concept of a Community Center is as relevant in Israel as it is elsewhere.

Conclusion

We can all hold our heads high as we consider that this idea, the *Jewish Community Center*, born in North America - in Baltimore in 1854, has demonstrated its

usefulness, practicality and adaptability worldwide.

You will be interested to know that JWB's Building Consultation Service is busier today than it has been since that period of intense activity immediately following World War II. We have apparently set a record because today 54 buildings are in various stages of planning, construction or completion - this, at a time of high interest rates and difficult economic conditions. It is obvious that the communities are expressing loud and clear their conviction that the Center is an essential answer to building community. We in the Center field are aware of this, but we must raise our voices to articulate this clearly amongst ourselves and with other community leadership.

The last JWB convention held in Chicago was in the year 1948. At that time, the renowned Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman of Boston, who was a national Jewish leader, was prescient in forecasting the future when he said from this platform that:

"The Jewish Center can and must serve then in the future as a place to which children and Jewish youth and adults can come for a significant participation process in group life; where they can cease to be lonely, isolated individuals ... (and) transform themselves from minimal and marginal Jews to potentially valuable creators of a new and rich American Jewish Community life in this country."

Were Dr. Liebman here today, he would have been astounded by the changes our communities have undergone in the last 34 years and, in particular, the contributions that have been made to the community by the Center.

When he spoke of what the Center could be, he was speaking of the future. The Center is similarly future-oriented. When the Center builds Jewish identity, when it develops wholesome Jewish family living, when it makes connections for its community with communities worldwide, when it develops leadership for the community, when it takes the lead in putting together coalitions of agencies - in all these ways it is building Jewish community and, by doing so, expressing its confidence in the future of a viable Jewish life in North America.

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