

INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

For the first three years of its existence, the UJC Jewish Renaissance and Renewal Pillar operated in alliance with JESNA, which provided the management and staffing for the Pillar’s work through its formative stages. Beryl Geber, the first Chair of the Jewish Renaissance and Renewal Pillar, offers the following conceptual overview and analysis. Her article touches upon many of the major themes that emerge from the articles in this issue, and draws together various strands of thought into a compelling vision for a renewed and revitalized Jewish community.

The Meaning of Jewish Renewal and Renaissance

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There is something about the “re” in the terms “renewal” and “renaissance” that often causes concern. It implies that there has been something good and valuable to which we want to return, a prior state that shone brightly and entices us back, that makes our here and now dull and lifeless by contrast. The Italian Renaissance rediscovered classical beauty, re-ignited scientific activity, and encouraged creativity. And yet, even this seminal example of a renewal did not transform the world all at once, nor did it exert uniform impact throughout the Italian states and certainly it did not occur without the patronage of the rich and the powerful. So what is Jewish Renaissance and Renewal, how do we understand it, and is there a vision of the past that informs it?

The Renaissance and Renewal Vision

The concern for “Jewish continuity” – slowing or halting the decline in numbers and in levels of involvement – has frequently been accompanied by the question, “Continuity for what?” What are we trying to encourage, what are we trying to provide, and how will we know if we are successful? Are we simply focused on demographics, on the actual numbers of people who claim to be Jews, or are we concerned about the capacity of communities and institutions to serve the needs of Jews, or are we interested in the nature of Jewish lives that individual Jews are living? Each of these – numbers, communal capacity, and individual identity – demand different solutions and will involve us in distinctive actions.

The Jewish community in America at the start of the 21st century is unlike any other diaspora community in our history. As Jews we are involved in all aspects of American

life as equals, as full citizens with opportunities to find our own identities and meaning in every sphere. Personal experiences of exclusion from neighborhoods, clubs, schools and in the choice of friends and marriage partners are few. Economically, we are well represented in business, in the professions, and in corporate life. We have Jews in the highest offices of the land – the courts, Congress, and the Cabinet. Being Jewish is not a label foisted on us by a hostile outside world. As so many studies have shown, it is a choice that we make for ourselves.

Because the world in which we live is different, models of the past are not replicable today. The challenge for those calling for renewal and renaissance is to offer new models and new visions that will help people answer the question, “Why be Jewish?” Included in this are the many associated questions about *how* to be Jewish and how to encourage our friends, our families, and our children to live Jewishly meaningful lives.

When the UJC decided to establish a new division to be known as Jewish Renaissance and Renewal, it was guided by two particular founding documents and the deliberation of a task force of people involved actively in a variety of institutions of Jewish life. The documents, written by Jonathan Woocher and Barry Shrage, look forward to the creation of:

A far more vibrant, engaging, content-full Jewish life for large numbers of Jews here and around the globe than we ever could have imagined just a few decades ago...We seek to build communities of Torah, Chesed, and Tzedek — a community characterized by openness and diversity, religious seriousness and life-long learning.¹

¹ Jewish Renaissance and Renewal. Toward a Vision and Strategy for the New Entity. Jonathan Woocher. UJC.

As Barry Shrage has pointed out,

The Jewish conception of learning, caring and justice can only be fully realized in the context of strong, interdependent “face-to-face” communities. Learning, justice and caring are the point of Jewish life. They are the seeds of the Jewish community. At the same time, Jewish communities are the ground within which these seeds must grow.²

When the United Jewish Communities was finally established in 1999, the newly constituted committee (Pillar) of Jewish Renaissance and Renewal was given the responsibility of taking this vision and finding ways to turn it into a reality.

National and Local Roles

Two guiding principles were clear from the start. First, UJC is not and was not the only body with this mission. Renewal in various forums and with varying interpretations, whether called Renaissance or Jewish Continuity, has been on the agendas of many organizations and institutions for decades. It is a matter of pride that the UJC recognizes that it was not the originator of these activities, and that it does not have the power to make a revolution in Jewish life across the vastness of the North American continent. This recognition ensured that those who were and had been involved in the field were part of the national effort of defining the role of and examining the value that could be added by a national body representing federations. All the religious streams, many national agencies, universities, and foundations joined representatives of federations as the new entity set about defining its role and trying to grapple with the interconnectedness of all our efforts to creating vibrant, inviting, and meaningful Jewish communities.

The second reality that we all recognized was that although collaboration and planning, innovation, and initiation of programs may take place centrally or nationally, the realization of those activities takes place locally. Whether it is in synagogues, excited by the work of the many synagogue renewal programs, or in adult learning classes, stimulated by the excellence of programs available from national sources, or in day schools and supplemental schools, informed by the research and curricula developed by central agencies, the actual work of involving Jews in activities that will engage and enrich them takes place locally, one synagogue, institution, or classroom at a time.

Thus, the task of the national body is to stimulate people, disseminate ideas, initiate programs, encourage collaboration and assist in ensuring that the resources, human and material, are leveraged. This means that it also acts as advocate and as a connector and that it models the collaboration that is essential for success.

The complex communities in which we live derive their qualities and cultures from their own particular mix of history and resources. No two are identical. In some, the major community player is the federation, while in others it might be a community center, and in yet others, synagogues. Individuals and individual families play different roles in each community. There are those communities where one family may historically be the fulcrum around which decisions are made, and in others, decision-making may be more generally shared across many individuals. Who the decision-makers are, and what the institutions are that constitute the Jewish community, will clearly guide the way in which the national agenda is interpreted and utilized. It behooves us to remember that the Jewish community is no longer settled only in major cities abundant with institutions, teachers, rabbis and Jewish professional leaders. The mobility of American society is also reflected in the Jewish community. Families and individuals are to be found outside the major centers, in towns across the U.S. and Canada, often in communities that are newer, poorer in resources, and smaller than those we used to think of as the prototype of Jewish life. Serving these communities and enabling Jews to live Jewishly meaningful lives in these places is a challenge that we have to learn to meet.

Jewish renaissance is dependent on a number of elements. We need to have vibrant, identifiable, and accessible institutions that offer a variety of opportunities for engagement, both with other Jews and with activities. We need to provide experiences that interest and excite people, experiences which reflect the values that undergird our institutions – *Torah, Chesed* and *Tzedek*.

Focal Areas

We chose to begin our national agenda from a number of places. No single endeavor will suffice to meet the needs of all communities, all institutions and all Jews. We have focused on Jewish Day Schools, working with JESNA and with other national bodies to implement the recommendations of the joint task force on Jewish day schools that was created by UJC’s antecedent, the CJF, and JESNA. Jewish

² Draft Working Paper for a National Commission on Jewish Renaissance. Barry Shrage. Boston.

education, however, is a life-long process, not limited to children, and so adult Jewish education has been another area of interest to the UJC's Renaissance and Renewal committee. Once again, we are not alone. Many organizations, institutions and communities are offering opportunities for study. We act as a resource and as a weaver of relationships. We are concerned about those smaller communities where opportunities are limited and teachers skilled in encouraging adult learning are scarce. It is important to relay information about programs that succeed, and to encourage the debate about the outcomes that will tell us that we are not only doing the right thing, but also doing the thing right.

Over the past two years we have reeled from the conflict in Israel, suffered as lives have been lost, and watched as the world, apart from the U.S., has withdrawn its support for Israel. We have learned that our campuses are not always friendly to Israel, and that many young Jews on campus are ill equipped to deal with the hostility directed at them and at Israel. The studies have clearly shown that knowledge about and connection to Israel has diminished over the past years, and it is incumbent upon us to re-establish that connection with what is essential to Judaism and Jewish survival. Education about Israel in our supplemental and day schools, informal educational settings, and early childhood programs appears to need stimulating. Further, the idea of world Jewry as a community of mutual responsibility, as extending the sphere of those about and for whom we need to care, needs to be emphasized. The Renaissance and Renewal Pillar has taken on the responsibility of spearheading, with our partners in Israel and in the U.S., an intensive effort to provide materials, curricula, and resources relating to Israel and to Diaspora Jewry for a variety of audiences.

The challenge of involving the Next Generation is a particularly interesting one. It is a challenge not only of reaching a generation that is often little connected with Judaism but also of finding ways to engage it that are different from our traditional institutional framework. Many of the next generation are not "joiners". They look inwards for meaning and they are impatient with organizations and with demands made from the outside. It is not that they reject being Jewish; it is simply that the ways in which they would like to "do Jewish" and connect to the community are not the same as those that we have traditionally used. Reaching and engaging the Next Generation in ways that are mean-

ingful to it is a major thrust of our activities. Birthright Israel (BRI) has provided one avenue where this can happen. Maintaining a connection with the young people who have returned from BRI experiences to their local and international communities is important if we aim to embrace those for whom the Jewish community and their own Jewish identities have been of little relevance.

Role of UJC's Renaissance and Renewal Pillar

Many communities, individuals, and organizations have developed programs and methods that are meeting the challenge of rebirth and renewal. Finding ways to connect those who are successful with those who are just starting is one of the responsibilities the Renaissance and Renewal Pillar has assumed. Shaping the debate, determining criteria for success, connecting independent institutions with one another so that we can develop whole communities of learning and caring, continue to constitute the underlying agenda for this division of the UJC. The focus will shift as we find answers to some problems and new challenges then arise. The purpose, however, is constant. It is to provide every Jew with a vibrant, engaging community with many gateways to enter so that each person can live a meaningful Jewish life.

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson concludes an article titled "Why be Jewish?" by writing:

Our seeking people need what Judaism possesses. What continuity is about, is an invitation to people to return to their truest selves and their highest nature, to allow them to come home to who they are meant to be.³

What Renaissance and Renewal is all about is making sure that people have a home to come to wherever they now are, that the home is recognizable and filled with delights that will keep them coming back, and helping them to look beyond their own single house to a neighborhood of compassion and caring that lights the life of every Jew.

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³ *Why Be Jewish?* Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson. Los Angeles Jewish Journal. September 6, 2002.