

# JEWISH VOCATIONAL SERVICE AND THE FEDERATIONS

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*Jewish economic stability is a vital part of Jewish continuity and must be pursued along with efforts to strengthen Jewish education and Israel-Diaspora relations. With government and corporate downsizing likely to continue if not accelerate, more and more Jews will find themselves underemployed or unemployed. The Jewish vocational service agencies need to work together with federations to ensure the economic stability of the Jewish community.*

This year we are celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the federation movement in North America. Federations are among the few American organizations to have achieved a hundred years of productive service, and the only one whose purpose and mission are based on over 5,000 years of experience and tradition.

Created to fulfill the twin responsibilities of *tikkun olam*, repair of the world, and *tzedakah*, responsibility of one for the other, federations and its member agencies have together created a sophisticated system that provides the highest quality of services to the Jewish and to the larger communities. This unique and successful partnership of lay and professional leadership has set the standard for philanthropic service throughout the world.

Federations and their member agencies are not immune, however, to the dramatic changes taking place throughout the world. We are witnessing massive changes in geopolitics, demographics, social and family values, and, most of all, in economics.

Structural changes in the economy are not new, but they are now occurring more rapidly and with an increasing impact. When the United States was young, we had an agrarian economy. Most of our citizens worked on farms. With the onset of the Industrial Revolution, people began migrating to cities to meet the growing demand for labor in the newly created factories. As advanced technology reached farming com-

munities, diminishing the need for farm labor, more and more people migrated to the industrial cities.

The harnessing of electricity in the early twentieth century yielded an abundance of relatively cheap power; electricity served as an engine for the next phase of the Industrial Revolution. While new technologies displaced workers, they also created new industries with an even greater demand for labor and helped increase productivity. The gains of this increased productivity, when partially shared with workers, slowly but surely increased the standard of living of the common citizen and helped create a large middle class.

The recent re-engineering of corporate America started with the introduction of computer technology, which began to *replace hands* (unskilled and semi-skilled labor) with the introduction of robotics and automated machinery. Over the past four years, the introduction of the newest computer technology has begun to *replace minds*. Although these machines do not have the capability of thinking and rationalizing in the human sense, they are able to coordinate work, evaluate data and trends, identify problems, and even suggest mid-level decisions. This capability enables corporate America to downsize the labor force, eliminating millions of jobs and *endangering the continuing economic viability of the middle class*.

In parallel, the re-engineering of govern-

ment, along with a growing acceptance by elected officials of the need to cut government spending, balance budgets, and lower taxes, is also causing the downsizing of the government's labor force at the federal, state, city, and county level. This downsizing has begun an era of decreased government financial support for health, education and social services, in which providers are increasingly forced to triage these services.

Simultaneously, federations' reaction to the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey findings and the changing nature of the Jewish population in the United States is one of increasing concern, and rightly so, with Jewish continuity and with the future of the Jewish community.

The rate of the changes taking place is accelerating at geometric speed. Reduction of government spending is not a temporary blip on the horizon, nor is it the achievement of one political party. *Reductions in government spending will continue to accelerate, regardless of the party in power, although the amounts of reduction and the priorities and methodology may differ.* A growing number of Americans, including those in the Jewish community, will increasingly find themselves underserved, underemployed, or unemployed. These changes create new, increasingly complex problems for the Jewish community that require extensive planning if we are to achieve long-term responsible solutions.

Earlier generations of Jews had invested in the building of synagogues and Jewish communal institutions that were then lost to the Jewish community as neighborhoods changed and residents moved to new communities. Federations should not accept the role of passive observer of change. Rather, they must carefully analyze these investments made by earlier generations, which are the basis of the current endowments and reserves of Jewish communal institutions, to ensure that they are available for future generations and not lost to the community.

Federations' time-proven and successful

fund-raising techniques will also have to continue to undergo re-engineering and restructuring. The motivations for contributing to campaigns are changing, and the appeal to younger philanthropists must change as well. The older generation did not need to be reminded of the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel. Although these two events must maintain their centrality, it is important for federations to broaden their appeal with many themes, and one of those themes should be *back to business*.

### BACK TO BUSINESS

Jewish vocational service (JVS) agencies were founded by federations to meet vital needs in the community: to find jobs for Jews, to battle discrimination in the workplace, to offer career direction for our youth, and to assist displaced adult workers. Founded on the concept of *parnosah*, JVS agencies had an obligation to help Jews secure a source of income so they could raise a family, remain independent, live in dignity, and continue to be a vital and productive part of the Jewish community. Since their founding, many JVS agencies have expanded to provide rehabilitation, skills training, mental health, developmental disabilities, educational support, and economic development services. In some cases, as with F.E.G.S., which is the largest JVS agency and one of the largest social service agencies in the United States, family services are also offered.

In the past, JVS agencies were in the forefront of securing government grants from federal, state, city, and county governments. The nature of their work brought them into contact with hundreds of employers, government officials, and leaders from other communities. JVS agencies created alliances with the corporate world and with other voluntary organizations and, in some cases, provided technical assistance to government and the corporate and voluntary sectors. The relationship between JVS agencies and federations grew ever closer

and ever more synergistic.

JVS agencies were the first to see recessions in the making because they were the first to be besieged by the newly unemployed and underemployed and the first to experience the shrinking demand for workers as job orders from employers began to diminish dramatically. As a result of their close working relationship with corporate America, JVS agencies were among the first to learn about lean production, restructuring, re-engineering, and the structural changes in our economy.

In addressing the problems that threaten Jewish continuity, *federations must determine whether they will view Jewish continuity through the lens of inclusivity or through the lens of exclusivity.* Efforts to ensure Jewish continuity must look to Jewish education, synagogues, JCCs, and Hillels and must strengthen Israeli-Diaspora relations through a planned and structured program of visitation to Israel by Diaspora youngsters. These are the obvious agencies, institutions, and methodologies necessary to ensure Jewish continuity. However, if federations view Jewish continuity in an exclusive manner, they will fail to ensure Jewish continuity. Jewish continuity is also dependent upon Jewish political, social, and economic stability. Jews must have the will and the means to remain a vital part of this nation's political process. We must continue to be involved in our overall society and share responsibility for the well-being of that society. Above all, we must maintain Jewish economic stability. If our people cannot get jobs, if our businesses fail, if our professionals are forced to be underemployed or unemployed, if our youngsters fail to be prepared for the jobs of the twenty-first century, we will also fail to ensure Jewish continuity.

The provision of health, education, and social/family services is a responsibility of the Jewish community and should be a vital part of our planning for the future. These services continue to be our responsibility under the principles of *tikkun olam* and

*tzedakah*, but as important as they are, they affect the survival of individuals and families, not of the community as a whole. Yet, if a substantial number of Jewish families suffer, the Jewish community must feel their pain and attempt to alleviate its cause.

In terms of community survival, however, rather than an individual's or a family's survival, Jewish continuity through Jewish education and Jewish economic stability together with strengthened Israeli-Diaspora relationships become paramount. If Jewish families are unable to make a living, if Jewish youth are not prepared for a career in the twenty-first century or, more likely, two or three careers in their lifetime, if Jewish businesspeople cannot succeed in their small business, if Jewish middle management continues to be laid off in large numbers from corporate America, if government continues to downsize and provide fewer and fewer jobs, then the Jewish community's ability to continue to be a vital part of our political process and to ensure our continued role in society will be diminished. JVS agencies therefore must re-engineer themselves so they can create programs to assist Jewish small businesspersons and aid them in economic development. They must expand their career development services, often in cooperation with Hillels on college campuses throughout the United States. They must expand their technological capabilities in order to find less expensive ways and means of helping the thousands of Jews who will increasingly find themselves unemployed and underemployed, at least during the first quarter of the twenty-first century.

Although there may be differences of methodology and priority setting between JVS agencies and federations or between member agencies of a given federation—call it creative tension—these differences are minor compared to the many areas of cooperation and mutual assistance that result in mutual benefits to the community. There is a tendency during periods of rapid change to look for quick and simplistic so-

lutions, whereas what is actually required is careful analysis and massive community input, resulting in realistic planning for the survival and enhancement of the Jewish community locally, nationally, and internationally. Jeremy Rifkin in his book, *The End of Work*, states:

The point that needs to be emphasized is that, even allowing for short-term dips in the unemployment rate, the long-term trend is toward ever higher rates of unemployment. The introduction of more sophisticated technologies, with the accompanying gains in productivity, means that the global economy can produce more and more goods and services employing an ever smaller percentage of the available workforce (Rifkin, 1995, p. 11).

How we cope with the inevitable loss of jobs not only among the unskilled and semi-skilled but also among the skilled, the professional, the manager, and the small businessperson is open to debate. What is

not debatable is that JVS agencies can and should be at the forefront of addressing these vital issues together with the federations on behalf of the Jewish community. Our position should be one of responsibility and leadership in order to ensure Jewish economic stability, a vital part of Jewish continuity.

The forces shaping change may be beyond the control of federations and their member agencies, but the way we harness that change for the benefit of the Jewish community in order to ensure Jewish survival and Jewish continuity is the way we will be judged by our children and by generations to come.

#### REFERENCES

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- Rifkin, Jeremy. (1995). *The end of work*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.