

# “JOINT” REFLECTIONS ON 50 YEARS OF JEWISH COMMUNAL SERVICE A Credo of Affirmation

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*Ted Comet retired after a half-century of outstanding professional service to the worldwide Jewish community, primarily through his lengthy association with the Joint Distribution Committee. At a reception in his honor in March, 1997, Ted offered reflections on that extraordinary career and the changes that have taken place in the Jewish community. The Journal is privileged to share Ted's remarks, and we add our congratulations to those of Ted's many colleagues and friends.*

These reflections on a half-century in Jewish communal service connect personal experiences, Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), and the Jewish future, and touch on four events that have most affected our Jewish destiny during this period: the Holocaust, the establishment of the state of Israel, the rescue of Soviet Jewry, and the maturation of the American Jewish community. These are all areas in which JDC has been deeply involved.

## THE HOLOCAUST

My experience in Jewish communal service began in 1946 when I went to France to serve as a student volunteer in a JDC-funded program to rehabilitate war orphans. I volunteered for one year and stayed two. It was a shattering experience that changed my life forever.

In France, when the Jews returned from the concentration camps and from hiding, they did not encounter a hospitable environment; their homes and businesses were not returned willingly. Survivors searched for family, friends, housing, and jobs. Into this hostile milieu JDC brought a message of hope: “You are not alone, someone cares for you; and most important, in spite of all that was lost, enough remains to rebuild your lives.”

The combination of seeing the depth of destruction and then the capacity of JDC to bring healing and comfort impelled me to make a career in Jewish communal service.

At the children's home, the scars were

everywhere. Boys would leave the dinner table with their pockets stuffed with bread that they would later place under their pillows, not trusting if there would be food the next day. Some girls came wearing crosses, having been placed in Christian homes for safety; thousands put in the care of non-Jews were never retrieved.

The first teenager I met, who struck me immediately as very unusual, told me his name was Elie Wiesel. Elie was part of a close circle of four boys. In later life one became a Professor of Physics at the Sorbonne, another a world authority on the Provence language (early French—of Rashi's time), and the fourth founded a yeshivah. When I think of Elie Wiesel's extraordinary achievements and those of the other three chance survivors, it breaks my heart to realize how many potential scholars, artists, writers, and scientists were destroyed.

As for the children, I was impressed with their capacity to respond to love and care and concerned handling; their resilience was inspiring.

The Joint was everywhere: helping local leaders establish social services and cantons, finding jobs, and revitalizing synagogues, community centers, and schools. The extent of JDC's fame came to my attention when two Yiddish-speaking teenagers from Eastern Europe were sent to our children's home in Versailles by train. When they got into a cab they could not find the piece of paper with the address of the home. Desper-

ately, the older one recalled the pattern whereby the children's homes were usually in the largest buildings in a suburban village and therefore were known as "Le Chateau de...", depending on the particular village. So they asked the driver to take them to "Le chateau de Versailles." When they saw King Louis XIV's Palace, one exclaimed in Yiddish: "I heard the Joint did things in a big way, but this I never expected."

### LONGING FOR ZION

The Zionist dream in those days became a major force in uplifting the Jewish spirit. The idea of a land of one's own, where Jews could control their own destiny, countered the traumas of homelessness and helplessness. In displaced person's camps where JDC operated, Jews prepared themselves to do battle for their homeland, training with broomsticks in place of rifles.

JDC was closely connected to the *BRICHA* and *Aliyah bet*, those extraordinary underground movements that brought thousands of Jews over great distances to Palestine. JDC provided funds and helped acquire trucks, fuel, food, and transportation for these clandestine operations.

A group of our older teenagers joined a contingent headed for a secret port of embarkation on the Italian coast. En route they were notified that the British had discovered their ship; they were rerouted to Rome to await another opportunity. While sightseeing they were taken to the Arch of Titus. They were told the story of how Titus destroyed the Second Temple and the Second Jewish Commonwealth in 70 C.E., brought the captured Jews to Rome in chains, and minted a coin with the words, "Judea Capta" (the Jews are enslaved). One of the older boys took out a piece of chalk from his pocket and in big bold letters scrawled on the base of the Arch—"Judea Viva," the Jewish people live on.

### The Significance of Israel

It is hard for young people today to grasp the electrifying effect of the establishment of the State of Israel. In one fell swoop, the Jews of

Europe were suddenly transformed from victims to victors. The suddenness of such a dramatic transformation was historically unprecedented. Israel became the rallying ground and focus of Jewish life.

It would be a tragedy if Israel, which made possible the rescue of so many Jewish communities, stopped being regarded as central to Jewish life. We must never permit unhappiness with a particular government policy or even such an issue as religious pluralism to rupture our long-term common interests. We deeply need each other, and it takes imagination and creativity to shift from a philanthropic relationship to one of partnership, involving community-to-community and people-to-people contact.

Here, too, JDC is showing the way through partnerships with government, with agencies, and with counterpart volunteer leaders.

### Salute to Israel

When I founded the Salute to Israel Parade on Fifth Avenue in 1965, it was hard to find a support base. Some said, "A parade may be suitable for other ethnic groups, but it does not fit into the Jewish intellectual and cultural tradition." Others objected to demonstrating one's Jewishness in the street. The turning point came in 1967 when the Parade was scheduled to take place on the Sunday preceding the outbreak of the Six-Day War. Converted into a demonstration of solidarity, a quarter of a million Jews came and marched and marched and marched.

Victor Borge, the guest of honor that Sunday, was told that the parade, based on the previous year's experience, would last two hours. After four hours he turned to me and said, "Ted, I don't want to be rude, but my wife is expecting me for dinner Thursday evening."

And that is how it felt, as if the Jewish response would never end....and we must ensure that it never does.

### SOVIET JEWRY—RAISING CONSCIOUSNESS

Regarding Soviet Jewry, I must express a

deep concern that this miracle has become mundane and is off the radar screen of most American Jews. The maturation of American Jewry enabled it to exercise its political power in the rescue of Soviet Jewry. Just think, when President Reagan held a summit meeting with Gorbachev, there were only four items on his agenda, and one was Soviet Jewry.

The feeling of a miracle never leaves me. Having been involved in the Soviet Jewry advocacy movement since its inception, including helping organize the first public demonstration, I never dreamed their freedom would be realized in my lifetime. In 1972, when I took a mission of federation leaders to Russia, we had a final briefing in Helsinki, where we were warned about the pervasiveness of KGB surveillance:

An American couple moves into a Moscow hotel. The husband says to his wife, "What kind of place is this; there's no soap in the bathroom." Two seconds later, a knock on the door and the housekeeper stands there holding a tray with soap.

In a restaurant they order blintzes. The first two are tender, the third is too hard to eat—it's the microphone.

We must always see today's openness in contrast to those dark times. We need to find new ways to raise public awareness.

In fulfilling this miracle, as we address the needs of the destitute elderly, we must not shortchange our investment in Renewal, for it is in Renewal, the spiritual rescue of Soviet Jewry, that the true miracle lies. After the loss of six million in the Holocaust, we cannot allow another million to be lost to the Jewish people.

#### FIVE CONCEPTS OF JEWISH IDENTITY

What do we mean when we speak of Jewish identity and continuity, whether at home or abroad? In trying to define its Jewish content, how can we find common ground when there are such disparate views and differences?

After struggling with this question for many years I have come up with five concepts.

#### Jewish Time

The first is the concept of *Jewish time*. By that I do not refer to meetings that always start late, but rather that we are the inheritors of the oldest continuing religious-cultural tradition in the world today. Existentially we are not just living in 1997, but are connected in memory as part of an unbroken thread extending all the way to Sinai and beyond. Whether we view the giving of the Torah literally or figuratively, we must feel as if we stood at Sinai.

My wife captured this notion in a tapestry she wove on the occasion of our son's *Bar Mitzvah*. At the top of this six-foot high weaving are the Ten Commandments. But instead of the usual smooth-shaped tablets, they are jagged-edged, as if they were wrenched out of the rock of Sinai. If you take your Jewishness seriously, it makes demands. In addition, the Hebrew letters are not static, locked into the tablets, but fall out and add up to the priestly benediction: "May the Lord bless you and keep you." This blessing cascades over our son who is represented at the base of the tapestry by a thick purple *kippah* and a *tallit* (prayer shawl) shaped like wings to bear him up to Sinai. The message: You stood at Sinai. Since Sinai is in a desert, which is a metaphor for a hostile world, it is precisely when it is most challenged that our tradition affirms life.

#### Jewish Space

The second concept is that of *Jewish space*. This does not refer to moon probes, but rather to our being part of a world Jewish people—a unique phenomenon for which there is no parallel. Just think of the warm receptions and connections when JDC missions visit with community leaders of other countries. But there is a deeper practical aspect to this phenomenon, one that explains why Jews, representing less than .025 percent of the world population, have an impact far transcending our small percentage.

I recall being in Oslo in 1971 when the then-Soviet Union was hosting an International Conference on Gerontology and refused to permit the Israelis to participate. The 900 Jews of Oslo responded by successfully lobbying the Scandinavian governments. In the end, the Soviet Union backed down. From a geo-political point of view, Oslo was not a small Jewish community, but an important outpost of Jewish strength.

#### ***Areivut* (Responsibility)**

The third concept is *Areivut* (responsibility). As mandated in the Talmud, "All Jews are responsible for one another." This statement is found twice in the Talmud with one difference that, although small, looms large for JDC. One version states: "All Jews are responsible to one another." The second states, "All Jews are responsible *with* one another." The latter formulation reflects JDC policy of not doing things for others, but rather working *with* them to foster self-sufficiency.

#### **Community**

The fourth concept is that of *community*. The *Ethics of the Fathers* states, "Separate not thyself from the community." JDC's philosophy of reconstruction has always been to build community. During my nearly quarter-century with the Council of Jewish Federations, I saw a radical change take place in the federations, which I would summarize as their evolution from a system of social services to federations becoming an instrument of community and, thereby, a means for continuity.

With all the structural changes taking place in Jewish organizational life, we must make sure that the focus on community is maintained.

#### **Jewish Tradition and Values**

The fifth concept is that of *Jewish tradition and values*. Regardless of our pluralism and universalism, authenticity requires a

rootedness in Jewish learning, tradition, and values. Our rich Jewish heritage is the window to our soul—and it is our responsibility to transmit the past to our future generations.

#### **CONCLUSION**

When looking into what motivates people, I have found that, when all the outer layers are peeled off, at the central core of all of us is a *hunger for significance*—that what most people yearn for is the recognition that their existence has some meaning and purpose. One of the ways of responding to that yearning is to connect people to enterprises of significance. And that is why JDC has been such a rewarding experience. For what can be more significant than to be engaged in rescue, relief, and reconstruction.

My closing point is taken from the central tapestry in my wife's Holocaust series. It is her "dialogue with God," so that the flames, instead of literally rising from the ground, descend from the heavens in thick Belgian wools. At the base of the tapestry sits a woman bent over in mourning. The technique is an open weave to reflect the moral void of a world that could permit the Holocaust to take place and signifies not only the death of six million but also all the children and future generations that will forever remain unborn.

Each day as I pass this tapestry the message I take away is that there is a mystical connection between the six million who died and the six million Jews in America. The moral lesson for me is that each of us has to be Jewishly active not only for ourselves, but on behalf of one of those who did not make it.

JDC's work transcends healing and restoration. On the deepest level it is an act of affirmation—we are and will remain an eternal people. Or to put it in our traditional way: Acts of lovingkindness and renewal are statements that truly say, "*Am Yisrael Chai*."

I am filled with gratitude for having had the privilege of being part of this glorious enterprise to ensure the creative continuity of the Jewish people.