

REBUILDING DESTROYED JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN THE FSU

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There is a very beautiful Midrash that compares two sites in Jewish history — Jerusalem and Sinai—and wonders why Sinai is not embedded in Jewish tradition and practice the way Jerusalem is.

After all, Sinai is where, according to Jewish tradition, the Jewish people received the Torah, the collection of lore and law that was the basis for Jewish peoplehood. At Sinai the exodus from Egypt became complete. The ragtag collection of former slaves now had an official national narrative, a history that united each one of them, and a code of conduct that set them apart from others. A basis for a common Jewish identity was established. This was an event of enormous consequence for Jewish history, and dare one say, even for world history.

Yet, Jerusalem appears repeatedly in Jewish life. The liturgy is rife with references to it, and we are bidden to pray for its welfare. Its destruction is remembered under every wedding *chuppah*. The Yom Kippur liturgy and the Seder both end with an expression of hope that next year celebrations and commemorations will be in Jerusalem. Fast days remind us of the traumas of Jerusalem.

So why, asks the Midrash, is Sinai not remembered in a similar way?

The Midrash gives an answer that serves as a fitting introduction to any article about Ralph Goldman. It declares that although both Jerusalem and Sinai have played major roles in the past, only Jerusalem, which according to tradition is the place from which the Messiah will come, is pointed to the future. The lesson: Although it is important to mark and celebrate that which was, it is far more important to take note of what will be. To rest on laurels because something was once great, and to assume that one-time greatness bestows a value through the gen-

erations, is misleading. It is rather potential that determines greatness.

Ralph, with his incredible list of achievements, could easily have rested on his laurels. Instead, his focus is always on what yet is to be achieved. The push to constantly reexamine, to ask the critical questions even if the answers may be painful, the desire to set goals and then to reset them, and never to consider the challenge complete — therein lies his appeal and his greatness.

This article shows how Ralph's approach was translated into practice by the JDC in one aspect of its work in the former Soviet Union. The enterprise is broadly categorized as Jewish renewal; the specific aspect under consideration is the effort to create Jewish Community Centers as the flagship for this program. Looking at Ralph's work in this area will shed a bit of light on the "Torah" of Ralph Goldman on community development and the role of the professional in the process.

First the context.

When JDC first reentered the USSR in the late 1980s under Ralph's leadership, it declared its goal as that of "Judaizing" the Jews. To put it another way, the goal became to reclaim Jews for the Jewish people; that is, to find ways to entice hundreds of thousands of Jews who had been profoundly alienated from the Jewish people, many for several generations, back into the Jewish fold. This was to be an unprecedented effort. Never before had so many Jews grown so apart from Jewish identity and experience and had such a concerted effort been waged to bring them back.

In fact, the effort ran counter to conventional wisdom. Pundits from numerous disciplines had been teaching and preaching the inexorability of assimilation. If a community lacked the institutions to transmit Jewish

life, and if, as a result Jews had few positive incentives for developing a Jewish identity, there would be no way to reclaim them, no positive reservoirs to tap to stimulate a personal search that would bring them back to Jewish life.

Using almost any measure the Jews in the FSU formed an assimilated community. There was no formal Jewish schooling, no active Jewish institutions to speak of, little Jewish organizational life. Synagogues were generally dormant; with the exception of small groups of aliyah-oriented individuals Jewish leadership hardly existed and where it did it was ad hoc. Leaders had little or no training or even exposure to Jewish communal life as it is lived around the globe.

It was into this setting that Ralph propelled the JDC forward, with the notion that there can be such a thing as a "post-assimilationist" Jewish community. For the Jewish communal professional, this was the first lesson. There is a place for research on communal life; collection and analysis can of course make a critical contribution to practice. However, ultimately research findings cannot be determinant. The flowering of Jewish life in the FSU bore this out. Contrary to any reasonable prediction based on the barometers and the measurements, Jews of the FSU have flooded back and have built institutions and the rudiments of community life. One can argue about the quality of Jewish communities in the FSU, but their existence is beyond dispute. The communal professional cannot allow the academic to determine the course of action.

From the early stages of the enterprise, Ralph pushed to establish JCCs. One must understand how far-fetched this effort seemed at the time. There were no facilities to house these institutions, there were no professionals to staff them, and no one could be sure that even if they existed, anyone would come. The response, at least for Ralph, was clear. If you do not have a physical facility, build a JCC without walls. As for professionals, they are not born that way. Find good people and, using resources avail-

able in Jewish communities around the world, train them. And the situation is not such that Jews do not need these centers. At worst, they are not yet aware of how much they need them. Reach out to them and show them how JCCs can serve them, how a pluralistic non-ideological setting will provide an avenue for entry into Jewish life.

In retrospect, Ralph's message here was even more profound. The choice that JDC made to establish JCCs in the FSU had a whole other dimension. Within the three components of this name are three more lessons for the Jewish communal professional.

The first part of the name is "Jewish." The only justification for the work of the Jewish communal professional is that it be Jewish, and profoundly so. We were not there to build communities; we were there to build Jewish communities. All aspects of Jewish identity had to find expression in the JCC. Israel was to play a prominent role. The Jewish calendar was to figure in the institution's programming. When one entered the building one had to know immediately that this was a gathering place for Jews. The art needed to be Jewish art. The music had to have an identifiably Jewish flavor. The Jewish dimension had to be explicit and of high quality. Of this there could be no compromise.

The second component of the name had enormous ramifications. The JCC had to be not only for the benefit of the community but it also had to be run by the community. The JDC has been a major player in the FSU in terms of budgets and in terms of other resources, human among them. With tremendous investments in these operations, it was tempting to also be the ones to determine their nature. After all, who knows better than we? We were raised and educated in these facilities; institutionally we had a great deal riding on their success. Finally, it is "our money." Therefore, we needed to ensure success, and there was no better way to do that than to assume responsibility for all aspects of the running of these JCCs. The first C in

JCCs, though, had within it a challenge that became the guide for our decision making.

Frequently, Ralph quoted the two words from the Bible that served as our challenge. In any decision-making process on the fate of these JCCs or on our relations with the communities in which they were placed, he would ask, "*Mi samcha*"? A loose translation would be "Who appointed you"? That is, by what right are you deciding? If it is truly a community center, the responsibility for its future rests with the community and its representatives. There have to be boards of directors that decide. There have to be local professionals who lead. Our role as an outside organization is to advise, to support, and to assist, but ultimately a community center has to belong to the community. Communities may be at different stages of development, and therefore they may at times be more or less capable of taking responsibility. However, under no circumstances should JDC, or anyone else, act in the community's stead, as if it does not exist.

There was another aspect of community that had to figure prominently in the JCCs and that was the nature of the Jewish elements in the center. JCCs are first and foremost a host for Jewish culture in communal life. What kind of Jewish culture is to be found within its portals? Fundamentally, there are two possibilities. In one, the culture is an implant from abroad. To a large extent Jewish culture is hyphenated—it is an American-Jewish culture or Israeli-Jewish, or European-Jewish, and so on. Those cultures are rich and varied, and the import of those cultures was the rule of the day at the outset.

However, Russian Jewry had to be allowed to create its own indigenous culture,

in fact a mixture between the new and the old. That part of the world was once an important wellspring for Jewish culture and if given the opportunity it would be once again. Given the tools they would create an authentic Jewish culture that is theirs, rooted in their experience, and that will become a more effective tool for outreach than any alien import.

Finally there is the message in the third word, "center." The JCC was to be exactly that. It would not exist on the margins of Jewish life in the FSU, but rather at its epicenter. Because of its open and welcoming nature and the flexibility of its mandate, all would be welcome and be able to call it home. It would be neutral ground, in which vying and competing forces, as well as complementary groups, could come and work out differences and plan how to move forward. Most important, the Jewish elements and that of community would be at its center. No Jew would feel unwelcome; all could come and take part.

Thus, the Jewish Community Center became the centerpiece of JDC's efforts at Jewish renewal in the FSU. It was far more than a program tool. It was a message about the essence of Jewish renewal. It was about the inclusionary nature of Jewish community. It was about the centrality of Israel and the importance of Jewish content in the Jewish revival in the FSU. It was about the freedom of every Jew to determine which portal he or she would choose for entry into Jewish life. It was about how a Jewish professional should comport him- or herself in this whole enterprise, in a non-judgmental way that empowers rather than restricts

In this way Ralph's vision was translated into effective community action.

The American Jewish Committee Salutes Ralph Goldman

With their hearts, hands, and great generosity,
two legends of American Jewish life,
Jacob Schiff and Louis Marshall, laid the foundations
of the American Jewish Committee in 1906
and the Joint Distribution Committee in 1914.
With the greatest delight, AJC joins today in honoring
Ralph Goldman, a legend of our own time,
who has taken into his hand the torch
of devotion to the Jewish people
from those legends of yesteryear, and moved it forward,
with wisdom, with grace, and with indefatigable determination.
In myriad ways, he has uplifted, educated,
encouraged, and ennobled the Jewish people.
Aboard ship, on his way to Nineveh,
Jonah declared, "Ivri Anochi" —I am a Hebrew.
Throughout his endless travels on behalf of our people,
across America, in Israel, and around the world,
Ralph Goldman has, in his own way,
likewise proudly declared, "Ivri Anochi."
All of us have been the beneficiaries
of his peerless humanitarianism and passionate idealism.



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