

# COMMUNITY CENTERS IN ISRAEL

## A Vision Realized

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It is always awe inspiring to witness how one person can change the face of society. Obviously, not every person can make such a difference. Ralph Goldman is one of those rare people who had a vision and was able to make it happen.

This article describes one way in which Ralph made a difference. He was a major architect of the Israeli Community Center (Matnas) movement.

The first Community Centers were established in Israel in the late 1960s. At that time, only two decades after the establishment of the state, the country was confronting the immense task of having to absorb some three million new immigrants. Tensions between the Sephardim (Jews of Asian and North African origin) and Ashkenazim (Jews of European origin), were strong; the "melting pot," which was seen as the solution to these tensions, was not working; and the educational gap between the two groups was growing, threatening to tear apart the delicate fabric of the new society. The country was struggling economically, security was an ongoing concern, and the state was still in its initial stages of formation.

Ralph Goldman, who was at the time the director of the JDC Education Fund, was very much aware of the need to create an educational and social welfare system in Israel that would deal with these tensions. In response, Ralph, a unique social entrepreneur, with much experience as a social worker and a firm belief in the value of informal education, came up with the idea of establishing American-style Jewish Community Centers in Israel.

Community Centers were at the time unknown in Israel. The prevailing facilities run by the government and by semi-governmen-

tal voluntary agencies were youth clubs. These offered meeting facilities and programs for young people, but did not address the needs of other groups, such as adults, elderly and retired people, children, and women.

Although there was initial resistance to the idea of "importing" the concept of a Jewish Community Center and adapting it to Israeli society, it did win approval from the Israeli government. Minister of Education Zalman Aranne appointed the young, bright, and ambitious Chaim Zippori to lead the initiative.

What emerged was a visionary and practical partnership between Ralph and Zippori, which created a revolution in the way Israeli society addressed its pressing social issues. This winning team worked together for fifteen fruitful years, until the untimely death of Zippori in 1984 at the age of 48.

Their vision was simple, yet brilliant: to establish Community Centers in every development town and every disadvantaged neighborhood in Israel. Based on the American model, and at the same time reflecting the specific characteristics and needs of the Israeli society, these Centers would operate on the following principles:

- The Community Centers would be free of any political affiliation.
- The Community Centers would serve all members of the community.
- Each Center would be an independent, legally registered entity.
- A board of directors would govern each Community Center. The board would include representatives of the government, the local authority, and the community members.

- Funding would be provided by the government, the local authority, and participation fees.
- The Center's programs would be run by a trained professional staff, assisted by volunteers.
- A semi-governmental agency funded by the state—the Israel Association of Community Centers (IACC)—would be established to provide professional supervision and administrative support for the Centers' directors and programs.

These principles of operation represented a major change from the prevailing mode of operating social services. They positioned the Community Center as a comprehensive, multi-service center with the purpose of building and strengthening the local community. The central value that Ralph and Zipori passionately advocated was that every community had the right to determine the kind of programs that would best serve its members and their needs. This was a breakthrough in a time marked by centralistic, patronizing governmental attitudes.

The Centers were built for the benefit of the community. Consequently, the community had the right and the obligation to run them. The board of directors was to include members of the community, and committees were set up to plan and govern its operation. Participants were encouraged to take an active part in creating and implementing programs to best serve their needs. Leadership programs, comprehensive services for the elderly, intergenerational projects, and programs to integrate new immigrants were developed. Young people were encouraged to voice their concerns and try new ideas. Debates on the future of the communities were held and task forces established to deal with housing shortages and improving living conditions by planting parks and gardens. This

created involvement and hope in the future. Very often disenfranchised and marginal groups in the community found a voice and felt empowered.

By the time the IACC was established and Community Centers started operating in various towns in Israel, Ralph had left the Education Fund and assumed a new position at JDC as the associate director of its programs in Israel.

In his new position, Ralph was able to continue the work he had begun. With JDC's support, the Community Centers undertook new initiatives, which were dictated by the needs of the communities. A notable example was preschool education. These programs not only provided a much-needed nurturing environment for pre-kindergarten age children but also offered educational enrichment for their mothers and employment for community members.

Ralph understood that the success of the Community Centers depended on a high and uncompromising professional leadership. To this end he established the Joseph J. Schwartz Program for training directors and senior personnel for Community Centers within the Paul Baerwald School of Social Work at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. By so doing, he brought academic standards to what was until then a semi-professional field, thus elevating the field of community work in Israel.

Over thirty years later, it is inconceivable to think of Israel without Community Centers. The very fabric of Israel society is permeated with values of community involvement and responsibility. These values were critical to Israel's growth in the beginning and will be just as critical in the years ahead. Ralph Goldman has made a lasting and sustainable contribution for which Israel will be forever grateful.