

ASSURING JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY IN A CHANGING WORLD

STEVEN SCHWAGER

Executive Vice President, JDC, New York

Throughout our people's long, often troubled but unquestionably rich history, we have been sustained by our shared commitment to the idea of *kol yisrael areivim zeh b'zeh*, "all Jews are responsible one for another." So powerful, so fundamental is this principle that it has united Jews regardless of distance, language, nationality, and differences in religious or political outlook.

The modern world offers us opportunities to express that sense of Jewish responsibility more universally than ever before in our people's history. Aviation and telecommunications have created a global village, enabling us to bring help within hours to any Jew in need, no matter how remote. Further, with the great geopolitical changes of the late twentieth century, we also have unprecedented access to our fellows in virtually every country in the world. And even though hundreds of thousands of Jews remain in dire need, as a people we possess the resources needed to overcome their suffering.

With these conditions in our favor and with a Jewish State in Israel that is strong and enduring, the Jewish people should be enjoying a Golden Age that surpasses any other in the past 2,000 years. In this era of globalization, indeed, we – the most global of peoples – should be confronting the challenges we still face and soaring to unparalleled heights of Jewish achievement.

Instead, there is an air of crisis in the Jewish world. Throughout the Diaspora, our numbers are declining, our communities are aging, and assimilation threatens a worsening of both these trends. Increasingly, too, we are straining to meet even the most urgent, desperate, and elemental of Jewish needs.

There is much debate as to why this should be. Yet, as it has so often in the past, Ralph Goldman's thinking about the Jewish

condition offers us insight into the critical patterns of change that are limiting our potential and threatening our future.

The patterns form a sobering picture of unprecedented and growing challenges to our sense of common Jewish responsibility. For slowly but unmistakably, *kol yisrael areivim zeh b'zeh* – the value that has sustained us for so long – is losing its vitality and strength, weakening our ability to seize the opportunities now before us.

A COMMON JEWISH LANGUAGE AND OUR WILL TO ACT

When asked today to speak of what the Jewish world must do to assure its future, Ralph Goldman usually gives two answers. One is the imperative of ensuring that our children and grandchildren share a "common Jewish language."

Here, of course, the meaning of a common Jewish language is far broader than simply Hebrew, even though it has always been and remains a *lingua franca* among Jews. Rather, it relates to the entirety of the Jewish experience – the history, the culture, the tradition, the aspirations, and particularly the values that make up Jewish identity and that together form our bond of kinship with other Jews on which our sense of mutual responsibility rests.

Yet, changes that have occurred in recent decades are eroding that sense of kinship, and with it a basic element of *kol yisrael areivim*: our will to help one another. For those of us in North America, one of the most familiar of these changes is the growing acceptance that Jews find in the Diaspora societies in which they live. Notwithstanding the resurgence of anti-Semitism during the past few years, the barriers that once kept Jews from sharing fully in the life of their

native lands are coming down – and not only in the West.

Wherever this new freedom exists, it can lead to a redefinition of Jewish identity – or more specifically, to a realignment of Jews' sense of responsibility. For, as we see in our own hometowns, as Jews identify more strongly with their general communities, they are more inclined to act to meet local general needs and less inclined to respond to particular Jewish ones.

While this shift is taking place in various national communities, we are also witnessing a divergence in the nature of Jewish identity in different parts of the world. Thus, among Western Jews, ritual and, increasingly, spirituality are central components of their Jewish life. In Israel, by contrast, it is the Israeli experience – the creation of the state, its wars of survival, the Hebrew language, and the land itself – that are cited as the most important elements. And, as a recent JDC-commissioned survey of St. Petersburg Jewry suggests, Jewish identity in the FSU is rooted in intellectual encounters with Jewish history and the Jewish people's ability to overcome suffering.

We saw evidence of how this divergence can affect the will to help one another when American Jewish support for Israel showed signs of wavering in the 1990s. There were many reasons for this change, Israel's own increasing prosperity among them. Yet, despite the fact that Israel still faced pressing needs, the sentiment that these were Israeli problems, rather than problems for which the Jewish people at large also shares responsibility, gained much currency.

The difficult years of intensified Palestinian terrorism and the heightened anti-Semitism that accompanied them brought home to Jews everywhere the extent to which their fates are tied together. This revived sense of common destiny – heightened when news of the seder night bombing at the Park Hotel in Netanya broke as American Jews were preparing for their own seders – led, among other things, to the national Israel Emergency Campaign. But, should external, exis-

tential threats recede (on the ground and from the headlines) and life return to "normal," the patterns that emerged in the 1990s could well reemerge.

However, the renewed closeness and mutual dependence experienced from 2001 to 2004 when Israel's twin security and economic crises were at their peak need not be a historical blip. Rather, this time of precious Jewish unity provides an opportunity to reinvigorate our common Jewish language—to address the slide in our sense of common cause and mutual responsibility — and to reverse the erosion of our will to act on this sense that so threatens our future as a people.

Yet, how? On a certain level, it simply means investing not only in Jewish identity-building but also in cultivating the element of connectedness within that identity: Like any value, mutual responsibility must be learned, internalized, practiced, and reinforced.

For JDC, strengthening this connection is an axiom of its programs around the world. In the countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, for example, JDC is seeking to build communities capable of meeting their own material, cultural, religious, and educational needs without the external funding and professional guidance their situation today requires. Yet, in a region where Jewish community life was eviscerated and the practice – and even the concept – of Jewish responsibility was erased, creating such communities requires instilling that sense of commitment to one another.

In part, this means creating opportunities for the region's Jews to explore and express their Jewish identities. However, to ensure that those identities include, at their heart, the element of shared responsibility, JDC also infuses Jewish content in the professional training it provides to help local Jews run community institutions, such as Hesed welfare centers, Jewish family services, kindergartens, and Jewish Community Centers. Instruction and discussion of Jewish values relating to responsibility and welfare, for ex-

ample, help trainees first learn and then apply these values in their work.

Making such fundamentals of *Yiddishkeit* central to the Hesed approach has been key to its success. In addition to providing the basis for effective, compassionate care, these values have made Hesed a vehicle for community development by encouraging impoverished clients and others to shoulder their share of responsibility for their fellows by volunteering their time.

All of which means that Jewish Renewal programming is much more than an "optional extra," a discretionary area of activity that can be jettisoned when other priorities become more pressing. It is a strategic investment we make in building the Jewish connectedness without which the Jewish people might not long endure, let alone thrive.

Such investment is essential in the communities of the former Communist bloc, as well as in others from Germany to Argentina, and from Turkey to India. Yet, it is also needed elsewhere in the Jewish world in an age in which Jewish identity and particularly its collective component face unprecedented challenges.

There is no single formula for the character this investment should take. If JDC's work teaches us anything it is that success in Jewish Renewal depends on understanding those with whom we work and helping them fashion their own authentic forms of Jewish expression. What is true in Ukraine or Belarus is no less so in the western Diaspora – or even in Israel, where being Jewish in a sovereign and democratic Jewish state raises questions of Jewish identity unique in our history.

At the same time, however, we must work to prevent the authentic but distinctive forms of Jewish identity that emerge – in America and in Israel, in Western Europe, the FSU and in other regions – from diverging so much that we move beyond diversity into a disparateness in which the "common" in our "common Jewish language" becomes ever more attenuated. Preventing such divergence means building bridges – by identifying and nurturing elements that are still shared by Jews everywhere

while simultaneously cultivating each community's understanding of and familiarity with how and why other Jews live differently.

The impact of such efforts can be dramatic. Consider, for example, the formative effect that exposure to FSU Jewry has on young North American students who join in leading seders for communities and isolated elderly in the FSU. Student after student describes the experience of discovering a different kind of Jewish life as having transformed their own Jewish identities. As one recent American participant described it, "The excitement the Russian students have toward Judaism is indescribable. For them, the concept of freedom has a meaning that people in America just can't understand. For the first time in my life, I was able to truly grasp the meaning of Pesach."

This is only one example. Similar benefits can be found among volunteers in JDC's long- and short-term service programs in overseas communities, as well as among participants in birthright Israel and in the kind of year-in-Israel programs that the Jewish Agency for Israel's new MASA initiative seeks to encourage.

Expanded bridge-building programs such as these, however, should also include opportunities for Israelis to learn about Diaspora communities. For although Israel has a place in the identity of Jews everywhere, Diaspora Jewish life is an unknown quantity to many Israelis, one that is often disconnected from their Jewish experience.

Important as it may be, expanding this kind of exposure to one another is only a beginning. To deepen the sense of connection, it must be accompanied by ongoing efforts to enable communities to contribute to and draw from each other's experiences and resources, to live and feel the breadth of mutual responsibility in their communal lives. Yet, doing so requires levels of inter-community collaboration that the Jewish world has yet to achieve.

MAXIMIZING OUR CAPACITY FOR GLOBAL JEWISH ACTION

It is to this point that Ralph Goldman's second concern for the future of the Jewish

people speaks: the need for a global Jewish strategy.

This is an issue that has garnered much attention lately. In a notable initiative, Israel's President, Moshe Katsav, convened world Jewish leaders in June 2005 to establish an annual assembly of global Jewish leadership to coordinate responses to the challenges facing the Jewish world. And in 2002, the Jewish Agency established the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute to engage in strategic thinking and planning on issues of concern to the Jewish people.

Such attention is long overdue. The Jewish people's sense of connectedness is necessary to our *will* to act for our common good. Yet, our *capacity* to act – the extent to which we can translate this sense of common cause into practical effect – depends to a significant degree on whether we do so in a coordinated, collaborative, collective way.

This certainly means discussing needs in a global context. However, to yield practical benefits, such discussion must lead to setting priorities, selecting the most effective strategies for addressing them, and identifying the organizational capabilities required to do so. Finally – and herein lies the true measure of collective action – it must allow for resources to be allocated to fund responses that promote the common Jewish good.

Enhancing the extent of Jewish collective action does not necessarily require a formal process, particularly because such a process could well become politically fraught. Yet, it does require – and President Katsav's initiative could serve to facilitate – a major shift in how the various communities around the world view their responsibility for their fellow Jews in other countries.

Remarkably, no such shift has taken place in decades, despite the revolutionary changes brought about by technology, economics, and geopolitics. Indeed, international Jewish collective action today continues to follow patterns set more than a half-century ago, when the world was a very different place.

Back then, in the early 1950s, European Jewry was still reeling in the aftermath of the

Holocaust. The fledgling State of Israel, meanwhile, was struggling to survive militarily and economically and straining to absorb hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Europe and from across the Moslem world.

Back then, America was the Jewish world's strategic reserve: Amid the turmoil elsewhere, it was the only community capable of mounting responses on the scale these challenges demanded. These responses included JDC's investment in a "Jewish Marshall Plan" to reconstruct the Jewish communities in Europe's free West, and the massive JDC-MALBEN program that built and operated hospitals, old age homes, and other direct services for sick, disabled, and elderly *olim* for whom Israel itself could not yet care on its own.

Europe's communities ultimately recovered their independence and vitality. Eventually, they joined American Jewry and communities from Argentina to Australia in ensuring that Israel, too, would not only overcome war and hardship but would seize opportunities, such as the mass aliyah from the former Soviet Union, to become secure and relatively prosperous.

As the Jewish people's great national enterprise, Israel has remained – as it should – the central ongoing concern for which Jews everywhere bear responsibility. Even though Israel has long since attained the capacity to provide for its own citizens, the Jewish world as a whole has developed effective mechanisms for ensuring that it continues to join in helping its Jewish State fulfill its greater destiny by working constantly to help the country meet the many challenges it still faces.

Yet, alongside those in Israel, other needs also have a claim on global Jewish responsibility. The aftermath of communism; the collapse of the Argentinean economy; the quiet, daily striving to maintain Jewish life in small communities from Cuba to Tunisia – these, too, are challenges for the entire Jewish collective. Yet, although world Jewry is well organized to mobilize support for Israel,

the burden for responding to needs elsewhere in the Jewish world continues – with few exceptions – to rest largely on the shoulders of the North American community, just as it did a half-century ago.

The combination of global needs and increasing pressure on local institutions, however, is straining the resources of North America's organized community. As they do, and in the absence of additional support from elsewhere in the Jewish world, pressing problems are left to fester in the face of woefully inadequate responses.

Nowhere has this scenario played out more clearly and more painfully than among the FSU's Jewish elderly. Amid the economic malaise that is the Soviet Union's legacy to its successor republics, the elderly have been left in inconceivable poverty, with paltry pensions, ineffectual health care, and no social services while their newly renaissance Jewish communities are as yet capable of generating only modest resources locally for their care.

The suffering of these 232,000 impoverished Jewish elderly is arguably the greatest humanitarian Jewish need anywhere in today's Jewish world. It is a need for which the Jewish world in its entirety – Americans, Canadians, Europeans, Australians, and even Israelis – shares a responsibility for addressing, at least in theory.

In practice, the absence of mechanisms for fulfilling genuinely global Jewish responsibility means that assuring their care has remained almost exclusively an American Jewish problem. Other than certain Canadian federations, Britain's World Jewish Relief, and the nascent FSU communities themselves, few, if any, non-American community organizations have joined in this effort.

Until now, we have been fortunate that restitution funds from the Claims Conference, the Swiss Banks Settlement, and the International Commission on Holocaust Era Insurance Claims (ICHEIC) have covered the cost of caring for 54 percent of JDC's elderly FSU clients who were victims of Nazi persecution. Yet despite the significant

easing of the burden that restitution provides, and despite support from the American federation system, from private Jewish foundations, and from American Christians through the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, JDC's services for the more than 100,000 elderly Jews who are not considered "Nazi victims" suffer from chronic underfunding – with the result that these Jews' plight is often mitigated only barely.

United Jewish Communities and America's Jewish federations are pressing to find additional resources to close the funding gap for the short term. However, unless economic conditions in the region improve dramatically and unexpectedly, this will remain as it has been – a long-term problem requiring a long-term response.

As financial and demographic factors diminish the role of restitution funding in meeting this need, American Jewry will be unable to carry the increasing burden alone. Nor should it have to. The challenge of helping Jews recover from Communism is not unlike what the Jewish world faced in Western Europe after World War II. Only now, American Jewry is no longer the sole community capable of mounting the necessary response.

The Jewish world must develop mechanisms that will allow other communities to join in addressing challenges to the global Jewish collective – be they hunger in the FSU or the revitalization of Jewish connectedness. However, this cannot occur unless there is first a renewed recognition that these *are* challenges to us *all*, challenges that require each of us to play our part in a genuinely global collective response.

Thus, for example, aside from institutional inertia there is no reason why Western Europe's strong, vital, and prosperous Jewish communities should not, in addition to their support for Israel, also take on a substantial role – at least financially – in relieving Jewish poverty and hunger elsewhere in the world. The case is particularly strong for them to engage in this and other forms of assistance among the communities of Central

and Eastern Europe, their neighbors in a continent whose countries are, in so many other ways, being brought ever closer through the European Union.

There is also no reason why the reverse should not occur – why smaller, poorer communities should not contribute to their stronger, wealthier counterparts. Although they might need financial and professional support, smaller and reemerging communities have much to offer, not only in terms of the diversity of the Jewish experience they represent or of the depth of their commitment to Jewish life but also by sharing the innovative ways by which they build or maintain that life, despite the difficulties.

A new reciprocity in the exercise of Jewish responsibility would enormously enhance our ability to address both the issues we face in common and those that are seemingly just “local.” However, if efforts to expand our capacity for collective action are to reach full fruition (and if we are to reap the benefits of greater global connectedness they would bring) an additional aspect of our global Jewish relationship requires our attention: cooperation.

A measure of competition among proponents of different approaches is inevitable and even healthy. We must, though, avoid allowing competition to keep us from the benefits that cooperation can bring, both in reducing costs and in ensuring that the best combination of talent is brought to bear in tackling Jewish needs.

Such cooperation increasingly characterizes JDC’s work with the Jewish Agency. It has helped strengthen our responses to the crisis in Israel and the economic collapse in Argentina, and it is ensuring that the Jewish world fulfills its responsibilities to the Felas Mura while they are still in Ethiopia and after their arrival in Israel. Similarly, our complementary programs are extending the reach of Jewish Renewal efforts among youth and young adults in the FSU.

JDC and JAFI, though, represent only a part of our people’s global array of expertise and experience. The more we draw cooper-

atively from that array, the more collective and effective our efforts can be.

It is precisely this thinking that is guiding JDC’s initiative to boost services to Jewish children around the world. Many face intense human needs – arising from poverty, family dysfunction, or disability – whereas many more are seeking opportunities to connect with their heritage and their people.

Given the scale of this task, JDC could not even contemplate acting alone, even if it wanted to. Instead, we are exploring ways of mobilizing a cooperative Jewish response – from among those already working on the ground and by widening the circle of those involved – to ensure that children in a given community have access to the full range of services they require.

Such a cooperative Jewish response would certainly involve JDC’s working with a local Jewish community to strengthen its own responses, such as by developing new Jewish Family Services. Yet it could also require working with the Jewish Agency, ORT, or France’s Alliance system to develop Jewish schools, or with Israeli, British, or other agencies to bring effective assistance for those with disabilities. Just as importantly, this approach would also seek to benefit from the experience of communities in neighboring countries or regions in leveraging government funding or other resources in meeting certain of the children’s needs.

This is the kind of global Jewish strategy, I believe, that Ralph Goldman has urged us to pursue – not a grand plan for action imposed from above, but a new way of thinking about what it means for all Jews to be responsible for one another and a new flexibility in how we fulfill that responsibility. To paraphrase a saying popularized by globalization, we must learn better how to “think globally so that we can be more effective in how we act locally.”

TOWARD A STRONGER JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

It is fitting that this assessment of *kol yisrael areivim zeh b'zeh* – of the Jewish

collective's ability to act for the common Jewish good – should conclude on the subject of our children. Much depends on how we care for them materially, emotionally, spiritually, and Jewishly.

Many urgent issues confront the Jewish world today – the hungry Jewish elderly, world anti-Semitism, the challenges Israel still faces. We must respond to these. Yet, over the long term, no Jewish need is greater than sustaining our will and capacity to act collectively.

And it is tomorrow's Jewish responsibility that our children represent. They deserve to be happy and healthy today, and they deserve the opportunity to acquire a Jewish identity and feel part of Jewish community life that is every Jew's basic right. But helping them build Jewish identities that include a sense of kinship with and responsibility for their fellow Jews is also essential if they are to grow into Jewish adults willing to fulfill the obligations that will make their own communities and the wider Jewish people vibrant and strong into the future.

Even in this time of limited resources, the

ability to make that investment is within our grasp. As Ralph Goldman wrote in his landmark 1981 monograph, *The Role of the Professional in Developing and Shaping Jewish Communal Policies and Strategies*:

We must make this an era of true partnership, one that is no longer confined to giver-receiver relationships – a partnership that is firmly grounded in the commonality of challenges we face today – East and West, Israel and Diaspora: protecting Jewish rights, providing for Jewish needy, preserving Jewish identity, promoting Jewish learning and preparing Jewish leadership.

Never before has the need for that partnership been greater. By forging it, we can turn the principle of Jewish responsibility into the revitalized collective, reciprocal, and cooperative Jewish action that our Jewish future demands. And with that partnership, we can overcome the crises we face, seize the opportunities now before us, and unleash a potential for so long latent in our people but that now, finally, we can begin to realize.

Jewish Communal Service Association of North America

JCSA
Connecting & Enhancing Professional Leadership

Connect with Colleagues

**SUBSCRIBE TO OUR FREE
MONTHLY NEWSLETTER**

EMAIL INFO@JCSANA.ORG

JCSA Programs — Current Events — Job Opportunities — and more

“All who exert themselves for the
community should exert themselves
for the sake of Heaven”

(Avot 2:2)

וכל העמלים עם הצבור,
יהיו עמלים עימם לשם שמים
(אבות ב:ב)

To Ralph,

With gratitude and affection,
The Ralph I. Goldman Fellows

Eve Lerman1987

Gideon Taylor 1988

Rebecca Schorsch ... 1989

Kathy Goldberg 1990

Shai Franklin 1991

Merri (Salpeter)

Ukraincik 1992

Joshua Brockman... 1993

Jennifer Kraft 1994

Daniel Ripps 1995

Rebecca (Adel-Pollack)

Butel 1996

Andrea Haas 1997

Chaim Motzen 1998

Jodi (Guralnick)

Block 1999

Eric Stern 1999

Rafi Rone 2000

Amy Jablin 2001

Dasee Berkowitz... 2002

Cara Unowsky 2003

Diana Kogan 2004

Shirin Ezekiel 2005