THE YEAR THAT WAS: LESSONS FOR MOVING FORWARD

DR. JOHN S. RUSKAY

Executive Vice President & CEO, UJA-Federation of New York

The American Jewish community, in its aid given to world Jewry, has actualized the statement: kol areivim zeh bah zeh. Where it has done less well is fostering debate and dialogue about the issues facing Israel, which underlie a deep commitment to the Jewish State. Today's challenge is to mobilize the American Jewish community to meet its global responsibilities while continuing to create communities of inspiration and caring.

This article examines three interrelated aspects of the time in which we now find ourselves. First, what we did well—how the federation system and the American Jewish community responded to the challenges that faced us abroad. Second, I identify an area where we did less well. Although its point of departure is the college campus, its significance extends far beyond. Third, I discuss the challenge of responding to crises while holding on to and actualizing longer-term visions.

WHAT WE DID WELL

"We will do our share; we will assume our responsibility." With these words, Larry Zicklin, President of UJA-Federation of New York, responded immediately and instinctively to Prime Minister Sharon when he turned to leaders of United Jewish Communities and North American federations in his home in Jerusalem last January and asked them to share responsibility for both caring for and rescuing Argentine Jewry. At its core, when we say "Kol yisrael aravim zeh bah zeh"—all Israel is responsible one for the other—it is not rhetoric or a campaign slogan. It is the very soul of who we are and what we are about.

Today, the 60 American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) Centers that are distributing food, clothing, and medicine to the new poor among Argentinian Jewry ac-

tualize that commitment. The support that is making it possible for the Jewish Agency to bring 6000 Argentine Jews to Israel this year reflects that shared commitment. In our guts, federations recognize that responsibility to feed the new Jewish poor of Argentina and to make it possible for our brothers and sisters to make aliyah is a collective Jewish responsibility.

In this moment in time when individualism has run amok, when entrepreneurial philanthropy often means that some only support their areas of personal interest, when funding squash courts at an Ivy League university and feeding the hungry are philanthropically equivalent, we know the difference. Our system stands as the expression of a commitment to collective Jewish responsibility that has defined us as a people through the ages.

That commitment was vividly realized in our response to the economic collapse in Argentina. And it was made dramatically manifest by the role UJC and the federation system assumed in mobilizing the North American Jewish community to "Stand with the People of Israel" during the past two years—in rallies throughout North America, through UJC missions to Israel that have now brought over 10,000 North American Jews to be with our people in the land of Israel, through advocacy with our nation's most senior elected leaders, and through the Israel Emergency Campaign that has now raised over \$320 million. In these ways and others, with escalating terrorism and Israelis

Presented to a Forum at the General Assembly, Philadelphia, November 21, 2002.

under siege, American Jews experienced the intensity of our visceral connection with the people and State of Israel—and we acted. Although other organizations, such as the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, were seminal in organizing the April 15th Washington rally, none played a larger and more significant role in mobilizing the American Jewish community over the course of the last two years than the federation system.

We should also acknowledge and salute our extraordinary overseas partners: the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI) and the JDC. Throughout the world, their leadership and staffs went beyond the call. Responding instantly, JDC made it possible for over 255,000 young Israelis to participate in summer day camps. JAFI created a system that placed checks in the hands of families of victims of terror within hours of an incident. The JDC quickly tripled the number of centers in Argentina distributing food, clothing, and medicine, and JAFI increased by 500 percent the number of Argentine Jews making aliyah.

One of the lessons we learned in New York post 9/11 was to ask, Who are the heroes? Yes, to be sure, there was Mayor Guiliani, but there were also the front-line police, fire, and emergency crews who risked their lives. While I hope you will join me in saluting the executive directors of JAFI and JDC, let us also acknowledge and honor the professionals working in those agencies. In addition to handling their normal responsibilities, these colleagues stretched, innovated, and, most of all, served on the ground to actualize collective Jewish responsibility.

WHERE WE DID LESS WELL

During the past two years, there has been growing alarm about the college campus. Much of it is deserved. At San Francisco State and Concordia University, ugly mobs eviscerated the opportunity for debate and undermined democratic values. This should alarm not only the Jewish community but all Americans, as should the divestiture initia-

tives that single out the Jewish State and quite possibly the Jewish people. If debate cannot take place in the sanctuaries of academic inquire, a great deal is at risk.

Our community's concern about the college campus emanates from what many believe is the inability of Jewish college students to respond to the claims and arguments of those who support the Palestinian cause and to advocate effectively for Israel. This ineffectiveness goes far beyond the campus. It is a symptom of a malaise. For large sectors of the American Jewish community, support for Israel has become both axiomatic and a cliché. Our mantra was, as it should be today, to support and stand with Israel. However, serious ideology and Zionist visions are absent. This has not always been the case nor need it be so.

Before the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, being supportive of our people returning to our homeland was a requisite commitment for those who considered themselves Zionists, but it was not sufficient. By identifying or joining with a particular Zionist movement or political party in the Yishuv one identified with specific visions of what the future state should or might be. Each of these movements and parties developed answers to three questions concerning the future state:

- Economic: Should it be a socialist or capitalist state?
- 2. Religious: Should it be a religious or secular state?
- 3. Political: Should it be a Jewish state or a bi-national state? (It is a little known fact that almost 40 percent of the Jews in Palestine voted in the 1943 Yishuv election for parties who favored the creation of a bi-national state.)

Different answers to these three issues yield many different possible ideological visions of what this state could be, ought be, and should be. It was these conflicting visions that provided the basis for the robust, if messy, debates of the Zionist movement pre-

1948 and for Israeli politics pre- and post-1948. Jews were not afraid to join and throw themselves into supporting Poale Tzion, or Ha-Shomer Hatzair, or the religious Zionists or Betar, followers of Zev Jabotinsky. Each had answers to these questions.

Pre-1948, we had been shattered in the Shoah; we were only in the first stages of healing. Compared with today, we were weak both politically and militarily. Yet, with substantially different, even conflicting, visions of what the state and future should be, we prevailed. A Jewish State was created.

Post-1948, Israel was under siege. For understandable reasons, our community rallied around the State and celebrated Labor's prevailing synthesis: a secular Jewish state with a mixed economy and a "modest accommodation to the Orthodox."

And rally around it North American Jewry did, particularly after 1967 and 1973. This may well have been the historical imperative. However, in the course of mobilizing our community in support of Israelboth raising money and advocacy—several generations of American Jews, including many of us, lost the opportunity to develop our own visions, even conflicting ones, of what Israel should be and can be. We did not understand that helping children or adults develop their own views of what Israel can and should be-that understanding the most difficult issues, debating them, and fostering individual views about them—deepens commitment and identification with Israel.

In the absence of such understanding and practice, when the going got rough—with the establishment of settlements in the late 1970s, with the change from the Labor Party to Likud, with Sabra and Shatilla, with the who is a Jew controversy—many without deep commitment or ideology drifted away. Yes, they have come back because of the threat today, but American Jews are privately trying to struggle through complex issues. Without an understanding that rich debate helps individuals develop their own perspectives on history, claims, and present

policies and strengthens commitment and allegiance, private doubts fester, enthusiasm wanes, and, most importantly, our college students and many adult Jews are ill prepared to respond effectively to the media and Palestinian arguments.

Where was the debate, where was the discussion within our communities, about the Saudi initiative? Was it serious or a bluff? How do we evaluate the first calls for non-violence among Palestine leadership? If the Palestinians turn away from a two-state solution, how should Israel and the North American Jewish community respond? How ought we respond to a Palestinian leadership unwilling or incapable of either embracing what Barak offered at Camp David or eschewing the use of terror against innocent men, women, and children?

We must come to recognize fully and appreciate that encouraging debate and dialogue enables individual Jews to foster their own perspectives on what Israel can be, and this strengthens commitment.

For federations this is a complex issue, and our role must be nuanced. We must continue to serve as an expression of collective Jewish responsibility and raise the banner high of "Standing with the People of Israel." At the same time, we must also recognize and support educational programs—in our schools, in our central agencies for Jewish education, in our camps, at community centers, at Hillels, and among the Israeli *schlihut*—that encourage individuals to develop their own views on the pressing issues of the day, as well as the long-term issues for Israel. In this area, we have done less well as a system and as a community.

HOW WE CAN MOVE FORWARD

For the present moment, moving forward is exceedingly difficult. We face a combination of Israel entering its third year of crisis, with continuing incessant violence and terror from Palestinians; the deteriorating economic situation in Argentina; and America moving into a post-9/11 economic decline that will bring severe government cutbacks

to the human services in New York and elsewhere. When taken together, these threats have returned us to a mode of responding to crisis.

It was only a few years ago that many of us talked about entering the world of "post-Israel-at-risk." We celebrated the decline of anti-Semitism. We welcomed the opportunity to embrace the next challenge of Jewish life—to foster communities of inspiration and caring that could beckon Jews not on the basis of obligation but on how being connected with our community and our people enhances life and provides meaning in the midst of rampant secularism and materialism.

Events have forced us to return to a Jewish life that many us had thought, naively or not, we had left behind. However, communities are simultaneously also caring for those most in need and moving forward to renew our communities. In New York, we are in the second year of "Synagogues for the Future," in which UJA-Federation and Synagogue 2000 are working with 22 Westchester synagogues to strengthen them. We are creating an "end of life" Jewish hospice capacity and strengthening the linkages among our human service agencies, synagogues, and community centers. We are also assuming our responsibility to make it possible for young Ethiopians to participate fully in the social and economic life of Israel.

Some might ask how, at this moment, when we face so many challenges in New York, Argentina, and, of course, in Israel, we can focus on end of life, synagogue transformation, and educational opportunities for Ethiopians in Israel.

On one of my most recent trips to Israel, I picked up Tom Segev's recent book, *Elvis in Jerusalem: Post Zionism and the Ameri-*

canization of Israel. In the book, Segev writes:

In the deliberately ungrammatical words of the late Jerusalem philosopher, Shmuel Hugo Bergmann, the argument is one between "two Jewish nations." Bergmann explains: Judaism has always had two dueling factions. One is separatist. It hates the non-Jew. It fosters an Amalek complex . . . "At every opportunity," Bergmann continues, this faction stresses "remember what he did to thee." Then there is another Judaism, one that I would perhaps characterize with the verse, "Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself." The prayer of that Judaism allows us to forget Amalek; it is a Judaism of love and forgiveness.

The challenge is to hold both voices. We must do both. The present moment requires us to do everything we can to mobilize American Jewry to stand with the people of Israel. This we have done, and this we must continue to do. Yet, if we only focus on these challenges, we will lose what remains a paradoxical opportunity: to build community and strengthen the fabric of Jewish life throughout the world.

At times of crisis, when budgets are cut, when we are so disappointed that a peace we once thought was at hand now seems so distant, when a world that seemed benign seems to have turned so dark, it is easy to turn away from holding forth a vision of a transformed world. However, holding forth that vision and taking steps to realize is what we have always done as a people. This is again the challenge for leadership today. We will weather these difficult days by carefully considering how to respond both to the chilling crisis and the opportunity that is at one before us.