

Leadership on a World Stage

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Where do the borders of Jewish community begin and end? Is a Jewish New Yorker responsible for the well-being of overseas Jewish communities? Is a New York Jew responsible for the development of Israel?

Only a decade ago, these were rhetorical questions with predictable answers. American Jews—New Yorkers foremost among them—were instinctive and generous partners in building up Israel, rescuing Jews in distress, or standing up for Jewish rights.

Today, the “who is responsible?” question has resurfaced on federation boardroom tables across the United States, but there is no longer a consensus on the answer. Even if mutual Jewish responsibility is the premise of federation existence, each generation of federation leadership must reinterpret this value and show that collective giving is a valuable channel for *tzedakah*. In 2009, federations are addressing this challenge at a time when local and global Jewish needs are many, complex, and competing.

How might today’s federation leadership respond?

The answer to “who is responsible?” comes from a timeless source—our Jewish values. Community giving is not a mechanism assessed on effectiveness alone: first and foremost it is about Jewish values. When we voluntarily give to a federation, we identify with a set of Jewish aspirations that we can only achieve as a community. We want to live dignified lives, we want lives infused with Jewish meaning, and we want to contribute to the betterment of society. Collective giving is giving *and* receiving. In this context, the answer to “who is responsible?” is clear: we are all responsible for each other.

Not only must federations convince each generation of the importance of collective giving but they also need to demonstrate that they are allocating dollars based on community priorities. Yet, what are Jewish community priorities? And what are the geographical boundaries of Jewish community?

A useful starting point for thinking about priorities is the Maslow triangle of needs. This model defines a hierarchy of individual needs from the basics of food, water, and safety to self-actualization at the peak. Fortunately, most New York and most North American Jews are able to focus on pursuing goals at the top of the triangle, where self-actualization includes Jewish expression and involvement in community. But overseas, a much larger proportion of Jews dwell at the bottom of the triangle. They are preoccupied daily with meeting material needs: young and old Jews in countries like Ukraine, Argentina, and India lack food, medicine, warmth, and care. Many Israelis, both recent immigrants and veteran Israelis, are also vulnerable because of lack of access to employment opportunities or weak social support. In addition, Jews in scores of countries have limited occasion to focus on the hierarchy of needs’ peak of Jewish expression and community involvement: I have visited many communities in Russia, Latvia,

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Romania, and beyond where Jewish families lack opportunities to meet each other and to live Jewishly.

When an agency like the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) looks at all these needs, it takes a holistic and a global view. JDC's thinking is symbolized by a gift we offer our longstanding supporters: a replica of a ceramic seder plate that JDC produced in the wake of the Shoah for Jews in displaced persons (DP) camps. At that time, while JDC channeled vast quantities of material aid to hundreds of thousands of survivors, my predecessors understood that it was equally essential to help rebuild identities and set new horizons. In the DP camps, JDC was putting food on one set of dishes while distributing seder plates to help Jews together reclaim their identities. Following this holistic principle, JDC today provides hundreds of communities with material support alongside an investment in creating space and opportunities for Jewish life.

JDC was active in postwar Europe because displaced Jews and traumatized communities were clearly in a moment of distress. For similar reasons, in 2009 JDC works wherever local Jews do not yet have communal funds or capacities to be self-sustainable. Although our role is temporary, JDC remains on the ground until communities can independently meet their own needs and respond to opportunities. This is a practical expression of living in a global Jewish community.

What does this mean for today's federation leadership? American Jews are one of the most privileged and philanthropic groups in America and in the world. As such, even though local American needs are real and compelling, each federation should affirm the principles of the global Jewish community and holistic priorities.

In recent years, this sense of global commitment has slipped from the American Jewish community consensus. First, Jewish philanthropy has become highly decentralized. As more philanthropists pursue individual and niche priorities, other worthy community priorities lack funding. Second, there has been a dramatic decline in the broad base of community donors: within one generation, the custom of giving to the collective is rapidly disappearing from American Jewish households.

Perhaps we are failing to transmit the idea that it is each Jew's task to nurture actively the value of mutual Jewish responsibility. We know that fragmented community decision-making processes and a disappearing collective are undermining our ability to act holistically as a global Jewish community. Because of this weakened ability, too many Jews around the world—the elderly in some countries, families at risk in others, and, Jews with unquenched thirst for Jewish life in many more—still feel marginalized and downtrodden. Neither making a gift to a foundation nor being of modest means excuses any of us from living according to the values of community giving and action.

New York Jews historically responded to global needs. Over the past ten years, UJA-Federation of New York, led by its executive vice president and CEO John Ruskay, has been JDC's partner in responding to every crisis and opportunity facing the Jewish people globally. UJA-Federation's allocations to JDC help ensure that New York Jews are supporting Jews where their needs are acute and where opportunities are critical. But are we doing what we must to retain our ability to act collectively?

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Regardless of where a Jew lives, we must work together to raise the Jewish people upward to the pinnacle of the Maslow hierarchy. A global and holistic vision sees fewer and fewer Jews across the world burdened by daily material struggles—and more and more realizing their full potential.

As a professional working for an American Jewish organization, I am privileged to visit with Jews in hundreds of locations where conditions are harsh and Jewish life is only nascent. As an emissary of New York and American Jews, I can often help them when no one else can. When we make a real difference in the lives of these Jews, it is a shining expression of the Jewish values we must recommit to maintain.

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