

## **“Living Lives of Sacred Responsibility”**

**Prepared Remarks by John Ruskay**

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Let me begin by thanking each of the panelists for their thoughtful presentations and each of the authors who prepared articles for the Journal of Jewish Communal Service. The journal is content rich and is a gift to me, to UJA-Federation, and the entire field of Jewish communal service. I hope all who have been with us during this journey take pride in what is found within these pages for they record our shared accomplishments.

We meet at yet another extraordinary moment in Jewish history. During the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we focused on enabling waves of immigrants to integrate successfully into America and for the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while continuing to build local communities, we responded to the urgent need to rescue Jews and to build the Jewish state. We were essential in bringing 3 million Jews from throughout the world to Israel to establish new lives in freedom. We come together today with the “age of rescue” behind us; with an Israel that continues to face formidable external and internal challenges beyond what we imagined when we came together ten years ago, but Israel today is nothing less than an economic, cultural and democratic miracle.

As American Jews, we find ourselves in the most accepting and generous society where Jews have ever lived, having achieved status and influence far beyond what our grandparents could have dreamed. We are no longer a kept community fortified by exclusivist American social norms. Thus, the historic challenge is, as we stated a decade back: can we create Jewish life and Jewish communities that are sufficiently inspiring and compelling so Jews choose to self-identify not because they have to, for they do not; not because of guilt, for they have little; but because Jewish life provides meaning, purpose and community? Because engagement in Jewish life ennobles and enriches their lives. Because we have provided a means for engagement in the world, framed by the wisdom and values of our people and the recognition of shared history and destiny. We have made substantial progress, to be sure, but much work remains. To be among the first Jewish generations to live with such freedom -- whether in New York, Tel Aviv, or Moscow -- provides new challenges and awesome possibilities. Hopefully, this will be the work of our generation and many that follow us.

Many ask: John, how do you do this work with such apparent joy? Yes, I embrace this work because it brings together my primary formative experiences that have now become a cause.

For me, Jewish life and Judaism is a way of understanding and appreciating the gift of life itself. Summers at Jewish camp introduced me to the power of vibrant participatory Jewish community.

Reinforced by youth groups and Israel trips that forged my bonds with our Jewish homeland, these experiences led many of us to understand that we could create Jewish communities that were vibrant, that provided both meaning and community. But as I said ten years ago, “those experiences were about far more than personal exhilaration; they were about learning deeply what the book of Genesis intended by its insistence that “life is good,” and about appreciating and acting on the injunction *l'kadesh oto*, to sanctify life, to make life holy. I experience our tradition as nothing less than a glorious sacred repository that enables each of us to savor every breath of life and to value every human being as created *b'tzelem elohim*, in the image of God.” My professional work – whether at the SAJ on West 86th Street, the 92nd Street Y, JTS or here -- has had a single mission: to enable larger segments of our community to experience the inspiring nature of Jewish life at its best.

My work at UJA-Federation also draws on a second core element of who I am. My parents, Edith and Everett Ruskay, ז'ל, recognized that we were economically blessed. They were role models in empathizing with the less fortunate. In many contexts — as activists to stop wars they considered unnecessary; in the Civil Rights movement; and by supporting local efforts to provide food and clothes for the poor — they taught me to feel responsible for all and to act on it.

Here at UJA-Federation, I am able to bring these lifelong passions together: to nurture and encourage participation in inspired Jewish communities so larger numbers can experience the ability of Jewish life to sanctify life and to invest life with meaning and purpose. And to extend care to all in need: the isolated elderly in Brooklyn and the former Soviet Union; the new immigrant in Israel; the recently unemployed. To care for both the Jewish community and the entire community.

How we understand the present moment and what is required becomes critical in shaping Jewish life for our children and grandchildren. The recently elected chairman of the Jewish Agency, Natan Sharansky, has sagely observed: “identity is now the driver for everything we care about. If one is not positively identified, why care about the Jewish poor, renewing Jewish life in the former Soviet Union, or securing the Jewish state?”

Many observe that we in America are experiencing both erosion and renewal. While contemporary culture is attractive and seductive to large numbers, we have a simultaneous parallel burst of Jewish creativity and energy. Hence the overarching challenge is: what steps can we take to strengthen the forces for the revitalization of our community and our people?

In this context, I want to go beyond the broad vision and strategies that I discussed ten years ago: to create inspired communities and

caring communities that are connected to Jewish communities globally. I believe the experience and accomplishments of the past decade confirms the broad framework and strategies outlined and they will continue to guide our work. Today, I want to call attention to four issues that are very much on my mind and, I believe, require our focus and attention if we are to seize this historic opportunity.

Foremost on my mind for tomorrow morning and the immediate future is the crisis of the affordability of Jewish life. Tens of thousands of our young -- in New York, throughout North America, and in the former Soviet Union -- are being turned away from Birthright, Masa, Jewish summer camps, and Jewish day schools. They seek to experience the best of Jewish life but for a lack of resources, large numbers cannot. While multiple factors impact such decision-making, the current economic crisis exacerbates the squeeze both on the poor and middle classes, leading growing numbers of Jewish families to forfeit enrolling their children in these programs.

We must address the affordability issue or we will deny growing segments of our people the opportunity to join our ranks and participate in what have been confirmed to be the most powerful Jewish experiences that can shape identity, particularly for those not raised in highly identified families or communities. It is time for Federations, foundations, major philanthropists, and all who care about the Jewish future to come together, pool our thinking, and determine a course of action for if we do not, we will have

squandered a unique opportunity to engage large numbers of the next generation. Look for an announcement early next year for a high level study on “Priorities and Philanthropy for the Jewish People in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” It will research and propose needed changes in communal policies and priorities to increase affordability and access.

Second, the reweaving of our community. When I called for placing social workers in synagogues ten years ago, none of us could have anticipated the positive impact both in our synagogues and in our human service agencies. Today, there are social workers from our human service agencies in over 150 synagogues, connecting the incredible resources of our network agencies to synagogues and their members; enabling synagogues to provide care to congregants in new ways. We are consciously reweaving the community by connecting our human service agencies more directly in the places where Jews come together as Jews. This paradigm needs to be extended and expanded -- to Jewish day schools, to *hillels*, and to additional Ys and JCCs. And we will. Instead of bifurcating human services and Jewish education, we have come to even more fully understand that both are essential for a stronger Jewish community.

Third, our future role in Israel. Our president, John Shapiro, board chair, Jerry Levin, and I are convening a task force of senior leadership to review, reframe and re-envision our future role in Israel. The Jewish State is no longer a fledgling economy in need of philanthropy for its survival. Israel’s GNP is now \$180 billion; North

American Jewish philanthropy annually approaches \$2.5 billion. While our funding supports important work in Israel, the re-contextualization of North American Jewish philanthropy calls on us to consider new ways, working with our partners, to engage in strengthening Israel. We believe this may require us to develop new partnerships with Israeli philanthropists and with the Government of Israel so that together we can again take on major challenges facing the Jewish State and its people. Israel is one of the two main stages of Jewish life today and effective engagement with Israel is imperative both for American Jewry and Israel, and for strengthening the bonds of our people.

Which leads me to the fourth issue. Simply stated, too few of our people -- on and off college campuses -- are able to effectively respond to Palestinian claims or to campaigns which seek to delegitimize the moral basis for Israel.

The last decade has demonstrated the import of Israel advocacy. We provide support for multiple advocacy efforts and will continue to do so. However, in conflating Israel advocacy and Israel education, we deny members of our community the opportunities to deepen their own engagement and bonds to Israel by developing their own positions and perspectives. At its best, Israel education prepares young and old to develop their own positions, their own conflicting visions, about what Israel can and should be. An important component of effective Israel education provides settings to work

through difficult historical and moral issues, which both deepens knowledge and solidifies personal commitment to and engagement with Israel.

In cooperation with the Jewish Agency's Israel Engagement Center/Makom and other Jewish organizations, we will embark on a major effort to enable young and old to legitimate Israel -- not because they are defending a given line, but rather on the strength of the positions they have developed after wrestling with Israel's history and difficult existential issues and reconciling their views with their deepest values.

These four issues – the affordability of Jewish life; reweaving our community to connect our *hesed* work more deeply in the Jewish community; our future role in Israel; and differentiating Israel advocacy and Israel education -- will augment our continuing commitment to the vision of creating “inspired and caring communities.”

When recently asked: how will your work proceed? I answered quickly: we will take on new challenges, while intensifying what we have initiated, informed by the successes and disappointments of the last decade.

We will continue to strengthen our unparalleled network of agencies: 24 JCCs and Ys; 11 Jewish summer camps; *hillels* on 12



campuses; our human service agencies and our overseas partners -- the Jewish Agency for Israel and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. For these agencies actualize our mission every day. Just this past year, they:

- provided food to over 120,000 New Yorkers;
- provided food, medicine and health care for 168,000 elderly Jews in the former Soviet Union;
- made it possible for 22,000 of our young to attend Jewish summer camps and 6,000 to participate on *birthright* trips;
- and enabled 15,000 to make *aliyah* and establish new lives in Israel; and far more

And it was these agencies that provided the basis to respond boldly to crisis: we saw this on 9/11 as well as during Israel's wars in Lebanon and in Gaza. Most recently, we met the challenge of the great recession with Connect to Care, which, in but its first six months, has provided emergency services, family and vocational counseling, pro bono legal support, and the embrace of a community to more than 9,000 New Yorkers who lost their jobs during the economic downturn. Because our agencies were in place, we were able to respond quickly and effectively.

Connect to Care also demonstrates why “innovation” ought not be considered the sole province of start ups. Rav Kook, the first chief rabbi of the Jewish community in Palestine, was fond of saying ha-

yashan yit'chadesh, ve'he-chadash yit'kadesh. It's a Hebrew play on words that translates as "that which is old will be made new and that which is new will become sanctified."

"That which is old will be made new." Division by division, agency by agency, program by program, we have challenged ourselves to re-imagine and reinvigorate how we prioritize, raise funds, deliver services, and measure effectiveness.

"That which is new will become sanctified." At the same time, we have seeded and nurtured a dazzling array of start ups and initiatives viewed as urgent for the Jewish future. We opened the first free-standing Jewish residential hospice in North America and created the Israel Trauma Coalition. We created the Leadership Institute for Day School Management at Columbia Business School. If you have heard of such starts up as Avodah, Jdub, Kol Dor, and the new Jewish Peoplehood hub launched at the General Assembly last month -- each of them and scores of others received encouragement, support, and funding from UJA-Federation.

Paraphrasing Rav Kook, we innovate in order to create new models that ideally will need to be sustained. And we sustain agencies and initiatives both to serve the needs of the community and to provide the platform for ongoing innovation.

Having ended the anachronistic division between domestic and overseas recognizing that those who care about Jewish life do so globally; having instituted mission-based planning and priority-based allocations; having restructured our fundraising from product-based to market segment-based, allowing us to more effectively work with our major donors, moving forward:

- we will deepen our efforts to strengthen synagogues;
- expand our efforts to engage Russian Speaking Jews in New York who now number at least 20% of our community and foster Jewish renaissance in the former Soviet Union and Israel so far larger segments of our people can experience the breath of Jewish life
- we will pioneer efforts that bind our people together by seeding initiatives to strengthen collective Jewish identity
- deepen our commitment to transparency and the highest standards of ethical conduct
- continue our efforts to make UJA-Federation a better place to work for both professionals and volunteers, for we recognized that one could not only call for creating “caring and inspired communities” out there while not working to make it real within our walls. While we have made progress, far more is needed.
- And we will continue to strengthen our communications program – as evident this year with our new video, our new publication, The Flame, and our new web platform.

But above all, we will continue to hold high the banner of Jewish communal collective responsibility. In a culture too often defined by rampant individualism, including in philanthropy, we affirm that we are indeed part of a people and a community that promotes the axiomatic value of our responsibility for one another, of the shared and mutual responsibility of each and every member of the house of Israel. We do this not only because it is the core foundation on which the work of Federation rests. We do this because it is a core principle on which the entire enterprise of the Jewish people rests. Our reciprocal responsibility is not a gimmick, it is not a technique. It is who and what we are about.

Federations, including ours, are not without flaws: laborious processes, sometimes too slow to change. But I have come to believe that Federations represent the very best of *areyvut* -- responsibility for an entire community and for an entire people. While some view our Annual Campaign as anachronistic, I see it as an inspired cause, an educational curriculum enabling each of us -- even those who have lost considerable wealth during the past year -- to recognize that we remain among the most privileged human beings that have ever roamed this planet, and certainly the most privileged Jews.

Our Annual Campaign defied those who predicted that Federations would decline in dollars raised. During the past decade, with talented

volunteer and professional leadership, we raised \$2.1 billion dollars; doubled our endowment from \$324 million to in excess of \$700 million and grew our Annual Campaign from \$117 million in 1999 to \$153 million in 2008; And last year, even with a decline in our Annual Campaign, total revenues exceeded \$215 million. We have reengineered the divisions which work with those in their 20s, 30s, and young families. If you have never witnessed one of our Generosity events, do so.

But it is not the dollars raised which we ought celebrate, it is what the Annual Campaign makes possible and what the Annual Campaign represents.

Our Annual Campaign provides support for institutions essential to the Jewish community and core funding for human service agencies which, in partnership with government, extend care to every part of our city:

I see our campaign as actualizing our abiding commitments to both teach Torah and, in the words of Isaiah “feed the hungry, house the homeless, and clothe the naked.”

I see our Annual Campaign as asking every Jew to accept responsibility for the entire Jewish people – those we know and those we do not, those with whom we agree and those with whom we do not -- to make sure that each has the ability to live with dignity.

Our Annual Campaign recognizes that while we may understand God, Torah, and commandments quite differently, we share both history and destiny.

What a sacred curriculum at this moment in time – for our people and beyond.

Serving as the CEO of UJA-Federation has its challenges, to be sure. But truth be said, it is a privilege. The Hebrew word for work – *avodah* -- also connotes service and prayer. For me, serving as the senior professional at UJA-Federation of New York, as the heir of a philanthropic organization second to none, combines work, service, and prayer. I am delighted to acknowledge two of my predecessors who are with us today, Ernie Michel and Stephen Solender – continuing resources for our community and for me personally. I am fortunate to partner with the most decent and committed officers that one could imagine; dedicated and talented volunteer leadership and professional colleagues; an unparalleled network of agencies, synagogues and organizations both in New York and globally that actualize our mission everyday; an outstanding and experienced senior team – Paul Kane, Alisa Kurshan, Irv Rosenthal, Louise Greilsheimer, and Stuart Tauber; and the support of my family who have always stood with me, particularly my wife, Robin, who provides wise counsel and comfort.

*Haverim*, ten years after we presented hopes and plans, I stand before you proud of our shared accomplishments and eager to deepen this work and take on new challenges. I remain confident that we can seize this historic opportunity to continue to renew and revitalize Jewish life. I know we can. And together, I believe we will. We are each architects of the Jewish future.

We will do so building on the accomplishments and learnings of the past decade and the progress we have made to create communities that beckon young and old not on the basis of guilt or obligation but on the basis of what they offer; modeling care for all both within our community and beyond; strengthening the commitment to *areyvut*—responsibility -- for the whole community, our city, and our people. As we do this, we will improve the likelihood of a strong and secure Jewish future and model for our own people and all of America what it means to live lives of sacred responsibility. As we do this, we can be, yet again, *or l'goyim* -- a light unto the nations.

What an opportunity! What a privilege!

I look forward to working with each of you as we write the next chapter of Jewish life together.

Thank you.