

Tzedek Yalin Bah: Justice Shall Dwell There

A national conference on Judaism and social justice

On April 10-11, 2005, the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs hosted *Tzedek Yalin Bah/Justice Shall Dwell There: A National Conference on Judaism and social justice*. This conference was intended as the first step in launching a national Jewish social justice movement that will:

- Build and strengthen connections among Jews involved in social justice work in different areas of the country and in various types of institutions.
- Enable more effective communication among Jewish social justice groups and activists in order for people around the country to share strategies, achievements and challenges.
- Create a forum for ongoing collaboration on national initiatives such as legislative campaigns.
- Develop a plan to provide technical assistance, upon request, to local Jewish social justice initiatives.
- Increase the visibility, both inside and outside of the Jewish community, of Jewish social justice work.
- Broaden the pool of funding for Jewish social justice work.

The conference began this process by offering a forum for Jewish social justice activists to meet one another, share best practices and challenges, brainstorm about possible joint projects, and begin taking concrete steps to initiate some of these collaborations.

Conference participants

The conference drew approximately 250 participants from more than seventy-five organizations and more than fifteen metropolitan areas. Approximately 150 participants came from outside of the Chicago area. Attendees included staff and active members of Jewish social justice organizations, Jewish staff members of secular social justice organizations, rabbis and synagogue lay leadership, day school teachers and students, and others.

When asked about their motivations for attending the conference, more than half (60) of the 110 people who answered the question mentioned “networking,” “meeting other activists” or “community building.” Other goals mentioned include*:

- Learning what other groups are doing/best practices/gaining new ideas (37)
- Building a Jewish social justice movement/network (10)
- Understanding more about the relationship between Judaism and social justice (9)
- Gaining organizing skills (9)
- Learning more about synagogue organizing/strengthening synagogue social justice involvement (7)
- Gaining motivation/enthusiasm (3)
- Learning how to work in coalition with other communities (3)
- Promoting one’s own organization (3)
- Learning more about specific social justice issues (labor, separation of church and state, housing) (3)
- Strengthening lay leadership (2)

- Learning how, personally, to become more involved in social justice (2)
- Catching up with friends (1)
- Gaining fundraising skills (1)
- Learning how to do more effective advocacy (1)
- Learning how to develop educational programs/curricula (1)
- Learning more about Chicago issues (1)

*Please note that many people mentioned more than one goal.

When asked to select from a list the topics in which they were most interested, participants chose*:

Organizing skills	61
Fundraising skills	48
Organizational skills	39
Housing issues	44
Jewish study on social justice	87
Civil liberties issues	53
Labor issues	43
Collaboration with other communities	79
Collaboration with other Jewish organizations	67
Negotiating diversity within the Jewish community	63
Educating young Jews about social justice	65
Synagogue organizing	51
Youth organizing	32
Other	13

* Please note that most people checked more than one box

Conference methods

The conference combined:

- Workshops that highlighted best practices or focused on a specific issue within the world of Judaism and social justice
- “Open space” technology, which enables conference participants to set the agenda and to talk about the issues important to them
- Presentations by well-known social justice leaders

Workshops

The seventeen workshops covered a range of topics, both practical and theoretical and focused both on specifically Jewish issues and on general social justice issues. These workshops were intended to highlight and share best practices and to allow conference participants the opportunity to network with others with similar interests and concerns. Most workshops were facilitated by at least two

people from different organizations and/or cities. This model aimed to encourage pre-conference collaboration and to ensure the presentation of a range of approaches and emphases.

Please see Appendix A for workshop descriptions and summaries of workshops

Open space

Two hours during each day were reserved for “open space,” which offered participants the opportunity to propose topics for discussion and to find others interested in sharing in these discussions. Conference evaluations identified this section as the most popular part of the program.

Topics discussed during open space were:

- Gender issues/feminism/male violence
- How to involve unaffiliated Jews in “Jewish” justice work
- Organizing in the Orthodox community
- National training for Jewish social justice activists
- Middle & high school Jewish social justice education
- Facing class differences among Jews
- Rabbinical students & rabbis—social justice education
- Role of Judaism in social justice
- Congress & Presidential elections
- Alliance Building & political litmus tests
- National infrastructure of communication, training & political campaigns/ communications among social justice organizations throughout US
- Separation of Church & State
- Involving lay people in advocacy in meaningful ways
- Young adults: our role in a national Jewish social justice movement
- How to engage the establishment in social justice
- A new vision for Jewish education that would 1) create space for critical thinking about Zionism as well as Israel policy & 2) understand that rejection of non/anti-Zionist identity in Jewish community and rejection of critical thinking about Zionism as a debatable political movement impedes broader Jewish social justice organizing which depends on critical thinking capacity
- Challenges for Jews working with low-income communities
- Open mic

Speakers

The conference opened with talks by Rabbi Robert J. Marx, the founder of JCUA and Jane Ramsey, the Executive Director of JCUA. The opening session also included a roundtable discussion among the executive directors of five Jewish social justice organizations: Jane Ramsey (JCUA), Ruth Messinger (American Jewish World Service), Daniel Sokatch (Progressive Jewish Alliance), Nancy Kaufman (Jewish Community Relations Council of Boston), and Vic Rosenthal (Jewish Community Action).

Other conference speakers were:

Dr. Peter Dreier (Occidental College)

Leonard Fein (Writer/speaker)
Rabbi David Saperstein (Religious Action Center)
Mark Pelavin (Religious Action Center)
Evely Laser Shlensky (Conference chair)

Please see Appendix B for speakers' remarks

Post-conference plans

At a closing session planned and facilitated by Rabbi David Rosenn (Avodah), Simon Greer (Jewish Fund for Justice) and Rabbi Jill Jacobs (JCUA), conference participants proposed and volunteered for working groups on a variety of issues. These groups are:

- Organizing national training for Jewish social justice leaders
- Writing about theoretical & practical issues
- “Get out the vote” efforts
- Shared Issue Advocacy
- Being supportive of local social justice groups
- Strategic thinking about movement/network
- Engaging synagogues in organizing
- Middle school and high school curricula

The person who proposed each working group became responsible for making the first phone call or sending the first e-mail to follow up with this group. As of April 20, 2005, working groups had taken the following first steps:

- The national training group, convened by Vic Rosenthal and Michael Brown, has begun an e-mail discussion of possible components of such a training and is planning a training in Chicago in December 2005.
- The synagogue organizing group, convened by Julie Weill and Elana Kogan, has scheduled a conference call for mid-May.
- The middle school and high school curricula group, convened by Aaron Dorfman, has begun an e-mail discussion about curricular needs and resources.
- The local technical assistance group, convened by Jane Ramsey, is scheduling a conference call for the last week of May or the first week of June.
- The advocacy group, convened by Noah Leavitt and Jane Ramsey, created and distributed an “advocacy alert” that opposed the the Real ID act; the group is scheduling a follow-up conference call to consider other advocacy efforts.

Evaluations

As of May 26, 2005, JCUA has received 30 conference evaluations. Some of the major themes that emerge from these evaluations are:

- Excitement at meeting people around the country who are doing the same work/sense of being strengthened by shared community

- Commitment to maintaining new relationships post-conference
- Excitement about diversity of attendees
- Desire to collaborate on shared projects/campaigns and to learn from others
- Frustration at predominance of male speakers over age 40/need to ensure that diverse voices (defined in terms of age, gender, sexual orientation, and type/size of organization) are represented at conferences
- Appreciation of open space format, which allowed for discussion of issues that might not otherwise have emerged
- Frustration with frontal presentations at mealtimes
- Excitement about the working group model and desire to build movement through a participatory process
- Enjoyment of most workshop sessions; sense that workshops needed more time
- Desire for increased Jewish content in program

Conclusion

Tzedek Yalin Bah largely succeeded in providing a forum for Jewish social justice leaders to meet one another, share ideas, and begin talking about possible collaborations. The working groups that grew out of the conference offer an initial means of facilitating projects and brainstorming that involve people from different organizations, metropolitan areas, and areas of expertise. All of these working groups have already begun exchanging e-mails and/or speaking via conference calls.

As noted, most conference participants articulated their primary motivations for attendance as networking and learning from others. We know, anecdotally, that many conference participants have continued to keep in touch, to share program ideas and strategies, and to make plans to visit one another's organizations. At least a quarter of conference participants have also been involved in the initial communications among working groups. Many of the organizations represented at the conference have added all of the conference participants to their mailing lists. Efforts such as these will enable better communication among Jewish social justice initiatives and will ensure that social justice activists throughout the country know about each others' work and consider themselves part of a national movement rather than simply an isolated local project.

It is too early to know the full impact of the conference. Subsequent discussions among working group members and other conference participants will determine the shape of whatever national Jewish social justice movement emerges from this gathering.

Appendix A: Workshop descriptions and notes

Descriptions as written by presenters appear in regular print. Additional notes by JCUA staff note takers appear in *italics*.

Can Social Justice Save American Jewry's Soul?

Facilitator: Sid Schwarz, PANIM

Over the past few decades, the organized Jewish community has retreated from being in the forefront of progressive social issues even as new Jewish organizations have emerged that are singularly focused on that agenda. The divide between these paths poses serious dangers for American Jewry's future. This session will be the first public presentation of the findings of Sid's forthcoming book on this subject, *Judaism and Justice: Values, Community and Identity*, and will offer some ideas about how this challenge might be faced.

Please see Appendix C for Rabbi Schwarz's prepared outline

Making the Case for Your Cause

Facilitators: Rabbi Jennie Rosenn, Nathan Cummings Foundation and Aliza Mazor, Bikkurim

How do we articulate great visions, big plans, and compelling dreams most effectively and in ways that can be clearly understood by others --particularly funders. This workshop will help participants become even more effective at articulating a social change vision, clearly explicating the link between vision and program, and developing a persuasive case for support. A hands-on workshop with opportunities for role plays, skill building, and direct work on making the best case for your own organization.

The conveners of this workshop began by letting the group know that they were going to focus on one very specific aspect of fundraising work. In particular, the focus would be on how to make a 4-6 minute, in-person pitch to a funder. Rosenn and Mazor role-played two separate scenarios where an individual was making a pitch to a foundation staff person. After each role-play, they engaged the entire group in a critique of what the group had witnessed. That proved a very effective method of getting folks to think about what worked and what didn't and how each might be improved for a more effective sell.

Following the role-plays, the group broke up into a number of groups of two. Each person in the group was able to make a pitch to the other, about a program for which they were seeking support and then was critiqued by the other. The whole group had the opportunity to share lessons learned in the two-person group pitches.

In all of the activities, we were to focus on what worked and what didn't and what was missing....making certain that our pitches clearly articulated "who, what, why and how. It is important to ensure that in six minutes that we demonstrate an analysis, a vision, competence and

outcomes, incorporating when necessary, change theory, delineation of a process and the overall impact of our work, short and long-term

The presenters laid out a number of tips including:

- *Be concise and specific*
- *Use examples*
- *Format well (particularly in written pitches)*
- *Present a clear change model*
- *Be explicit about what success looks like*
- *Connect the dots*
- *Show analysis*
- *Differentiate long and short-term outcomes*
- *Share failures and lessons*
- *Be non-adversarial*
- *No guilt/no entitlement*
- *Good boundaries*
- *Do our research*
- *Be familiar with work of others*
- *Don't disparage others' work*
- *Show need, not neediness*
- *Show you can make a difference*
- *Be authentic, not obsequious*
- *Understand funder constraints and constellation of stakeholders*
- *Don't make up project to conform to funder interests/don't chase money*
- *Know your organization's center/core values*
- *See funder relations on a continuum-not as a one-shot deal*
- *Don't personalize rejection*

Group added these elements:

- *Show passion*
- *Show track record and capacity to deliver*
- *Do leg work in learning about the funders' interests*
- *Connect with the funders' interests*
- *Think strategically*
- *Seek and demonstrate buy-in from others*
- *Explain context of project and its overall importance*
- *With Jewish funders, make sure to express Jewish context*

Think Yiddish, Dress British: Effective Jewish Social Justice Activism for the 21st Century
Facilitators: Daniel Sokatch, Progressive Jewish Alliance and Simon Greer, Jewish Fund for Justice

Greer and Sokatch argue that through working within the camp of the community, radiating ahavat klal yisrael, saying things so that they can be heard, striving for organizational effectiveness and excellence, and acting strategically and responsibly, Jewish social justice organizations can move the communal "tikkun olam" conversation beyond service and dialogue to advocacy and action, and in so doing help the Jewish community take its rightful place at the table of the community coalitions working for social justice.

What is power and how do we bring our awareness of power relations to our work?

Greer and Sokatch began this session by creating a "power sculpture". In this exercise, workshop participants left the room, which was arranged to resemble a corporate or government office. Participants were then invited to enter the room one-by-one and silently "assume a position of power." Participants entered, linked arms, and focused their attention and power at the desk – demonstrating their collective strength. (Simon said that after leading this exercise more than 200 times, this was only the 2nd time he had seen the participants "get" the point– the other was in Poland with a group of Solidarity activists.)

The exercise led to a discussion about where power comes from, and the various factors which influence power. Participants shared ideas of how to teach "power", and how to do that from within our Jewish heritage. The importance of thinking analytically about how to win what you want to win, and what one's organization theory of social change looks like, were emphasized.

Arts, Culture, and Identity Building for Jewish Social Justice

Facilitator: Jenny Romaine, Great Small Works and Circus Amok

Jenny Romaine of JFREJ facilitated the workshop on the importance of Jewish arts & culture to social justice work. She talked about her background as a performer and artist in New York, as a child of Yiddish-speaking immigrants, and a student of Jewish/Yiddish, pre-holocaust cultural history. She then explained a bit about her approach to creating her performance pieces. She said she looks for the intersection between art, politics and culture in any piece she is creating. This way the work can be made accessible to artists, activists and Jews of all types -- even when everyone's political views don't match up. She had participants read together from the script of her recently produced Purim shpiel and showed us a clip of a video from that performance. She also showed us a clip of a performance created by New York high school students and artists to address issues of racism and tracking in schools. Throughout her workshop, Romaine emphasized the importance of hiring professional artists to do the work while leaving room for laypeople to participate in the performances.

Spirituality and Social Justice

Facilitators: Or Rose, Hebrew College and Rabbi Sheila Weinberg, Institute for Jewish Spirituality

What does it mean to be a Jewish spiritual activist? How might one connect the disciplines of theology, prayer and meditation, and social justice? What do figures like Amos, the Ba'al Shem Tov, and Abraham Joshua Heschel have to teach us? We will explore these and other relevant questions through text study, guided meditation, and song.

The group began by singing some niggunim. Rabbi Weinberg spoke about getting rid of the division between spirituality and social justice and bringing the two together. She spoke of the

spiritual as relational and sustaining and of the need to connect with something greater than ourselves: values, power, help, justice, love, God for wholeness.

Or Rose discussed ways in which Oscar Romero's theology and activism can and can not be translated into Jewish terms and about the theology of Abraham Joshua Heschel.

The group also practiced a short sitting meditation.

Dismantling Racism and Anti-Semitism

Facilitators: Yavila McCoy, Ayecha and Dara Silverman, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice

This session is a forum for Jews to critically engage the intersections and parallels between work to dismantle racism and anti-Semitism through social justice initiatives. Interactive exercises, role play and discussion, will be used to explore the historical relationship between Racism and anti-Semitism and the ways that these "isms" affect Jewish identity, individual and institutional effectiveness, and our ability to be meaningful allies and change agents in anti-oppression work.

Making Mitzvot with our Money: Jewish Communities and Community Investment

Facilitators: Amanda Joseph, SHEFA Fund, Julie Putterman, Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, and Vic Rosenthal, Jewish Community Action

Jewish communities throughout the country are using community investment as a powerful and effective strategy for tikkun olam. This innovative approach to deploying Jewish communal assets in low-income neighborhoods has strong links to our American Jewish past, and important implications for our future. How do we organize our communal assets to participate in a tzedakah activity to foster greater social justice while revitalizing our cities? How can we build partnerships with low- and moderate-income neighborhoods and at the same time engage and energize the Jewish community, across denominations and institutions? Learn how groups are working nationally and locally -- both within and outside the Jewish community -- to create community investment activity and share your own experiences, challenges and successes.

The workshop focused on developing plans for investing and maintaining Jewish values while working within and with a variety of different communities.. Many of the participants were looking for ways to finance or invest money from synagogues or groups to complete major projects or to begin community investment endeavors. Another concern was the Community Reinvestment Act and how to receive financing from banks for affordable housing projects.

Amanda talked about the work of the Shefa Fund and about socially responsible investing and discussed ways to balance the needs of low income communities with the needs of funders and investors from the Jewish community.

Julie Putterman discussed the origin of JCUA's Community Development program and several of the projects that have been funded through it. Julie also explained the ways in which the community venture partners are asked to finance the various projects and proposals brought to JCUA.

Vic Rosenthal told the group about the various projects JCA is working on in Minn. Vic focused on ways to mobilize the Jewish community to work together to establish investment programs that

would benefit communities that once were Jewish neighborhoods, but which now are low-income communities that have little financial investment. He also discussed the Community Reinvestment Act and how it affects potential investors.

Engaging the Jewish Community in Gay/Lesbian Issues

Facilitators: Idit Klein, Boston Keshet and Johanna Golden

Participants watched and discussed a documentary about a high school student (now in college) who formed a Gay Straight Alliance in her private Jewish day school. Participants acknowledged that it is difficult to get mainstream Jewish social justice activists to recognize LGBT issues as an urban issue, that funders don't regard LGBT Jews as a segment of the unaffiliated population worth bringing into the fold, and that sometimes it's easier to work on issues outside our community than to look internally at the injustices within our own communities—even though many staff at Jewish social justice organizations are queer, the leadership of these organization often don't want to integrate queer issues into the work as these issues are seen as “too controversial”.

Building Collaborations with other Religious and Ethnic Groups

Facilitators: Brian Gladstein and Guy Austrian, Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, Professor Larry Golden, University of Illinois at Springfield

This workshop will explore the benefits, challenges, and strategies to working with other religious and ethnic groups. We will engage in a participatory analysis of three campaigns in which collaboration with other religious and ethnic groups served a pivotal role in the campaigns. The three case studies will specifically explore working with the Muslim community after the attacks on September 11th; working with low income and minority communities on the southwest side of Chicago fighting to restore train services, and working with a diverse coalition to combat white supremacist activity and hate crimes including gay bashing and vandalism of synagogues and mosques.

Participants split into groups to discuss three case studies while asking the following questions:

- 1) Can we move/inspire Jewish communities to work on issues of mutual importance with group with whom we might have differences?*
- 2) Are there specific steps or principles that might guide such coalition organizing?*
- 3) How do we do this in a way that will inspire continuing participation in coalitions working for social justice.*

Groups considered the following three case studies:

- 1) Blue Line Transit Task Force (extending service on subway line that serves low-income neighborhood)
Addressed power analysis, consultants, technical assistance, support from staff within organizations wanting to work together, training civil activists, distributing literature, being sensitive to language barriers and child care, asset mapping, confronting self-interest, stressing mutuality & not being paternalistic, not enforcing Jewish stereotypes, exploring motivations.*
- 2) Middle size city hate crime
Addressed limits of coalition building, defining boundaries, Israel issue, focusing on*

shared ideas, relationship building, incorporating Jewish text.

- 3) *Jewish-Muslim initiative*
Addressed wedge issues that can overshadow shared ideas, fear of ostracism from “mainstream” Jewish organizations, building credibility.

Overarching themes included:

- 1) *Need for coalitions to have long-term goals*
- 2) *Need for coalitions to be based in personal relationships*
- 3) *Inherent difficulty of beginning and maintaining relationships*

The Affordable Housing Crisis: American Realities, Jewish Responses

Facilitators: Rabbi Jill Jacobs, Jewish Council on Urban Affairs and Mark Levine, one-economy.com

Over the past few years, the federal government has significantly decreased its involvement in addressing the housing needs of low-income Americans. In this workshop, we will consider some of the today's cutting edge work in this sector, and will explore Jewish texts that can help us to develop a Jewish approach to housing.

Rabbi Jacobs taught a series of rabbinic texts that consider the following questions:

- 1) *What is the impact of homelessness?*
- 2) *Is housing a basic entitlement?*
- 3) *What constitutes sufficient housing?*

Mark Levine then spoke about some contemporary housing issues including the end of Section 8 vouchers, changes in Section 8 vouchers, HUD, and HOPE VI.

And Youth Shall See Visions: Mobilizing Young Adults for Social Justice

Facilitators: Rabbi David Rosenn, AVODAH, Mik Moore, Political Consultant, and Annie Grossman, Jewish Council on Urban Affairs

Social justice movements have always attracted and have often been led by young people with energy, excitement, and idealism. Jewish communal institutions somehow make due without these men and women, more or less accepting as inevitable a ten to twenty year hiatus between bar/bat mitzvah and childrearing. This communal attitude has made the mobilization of young Jews more difficult even for Jewish organizations that focus on social justice. Yet over the past decade, several Jewish groups and projects have successfully engaged this elusive group. This workshop will review some proven strategies and attempt to apply them to prospective campaigns.

Mik Moore opened, gave personal background and discussed relevant experiences engaging young people in social justice work. He presented the PARSHA model as a means of engaging young people:

Peer-led: *young people are best mobilized and engaged by other young people.*

Accessible: *young people need material that is inviting and easy to use.*

Relevant: young people should be mobilized around their issues, not your issues
Social: young people enjoy community, meeting new people with similar interests.
Hook-up: young people shouldn't need to make a lifetime commitment to get involved
Action: young people have little patience for endless debate and planning

David Rosenn and Annie Grossman gave their own introductions and their reflections on the PARSHA model, in light of their particular experiences.

Participants broke into three groups to discuss ways to use the PARSHA method to engage young people in three campaigns:

- (a) Campaign A. Pass a living wage bill in your City/State.*
- (b) Campaign B. Build a lay-led social justice group in a large urban synagogue.*
- (c) Campaign C. Defeat Rick Santorum in '06.*

Each group reported back their discussions and thoughts about how to apply the PARSHA method to these campaigns.

Effective Allies: Jewish Organizers Working in Diverse Communities to Effect Change

Facilitators: Sara Phillips and Anna Goldberger, Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, Jessica Aranda, Latino Union of Chicago, Alejandra L. Ibañez, Pilsen Alliance, Michael Brown, Jewish Organizing Initiative, and Jewish Organizing Initiative Alumni

What is community organizing? What role do Jewish organizations play in organizing non-Jewish communities? What models exist for this work? These and other questions will be explored through a panel discussion and engaging activities led by representatives from the Jewish Organizing Initiative and the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs.

The Effective Allies session aimed to help conference attendees understand effective approaches to organizing for social change. The group of about thirty divided into three small groups and prepared to role-play scenarios in which parents wanting school reform approached organizations working for change using three very different organizing methods. Following the role-plays, the large group discussed the various approaches and identified the benefits and drawbacks of each. The group whose organizing methodology facilitated empowerment of parents and students in the organizing/advocacy process seemed to be favored by most people in the group.

Representatives from two of JCUA's partner groups, the Pilsen Alliance and the Telpochcalli Community Education Project, spoke to the group about their experiences working with JCUA to organize in their communities.

Michael Brown of JOI (Jewish Organizing Initiative) played a video tape about the JOI program, which teaches young Jewish activists how to be effective organizers. Several JOI graduates who attended the session spoke about what they learned through JOI, and how this knowledge helped them in their "on the ground" organizing work.

Humane Urbanism

Facilitator: Dr. Aryeh Cohen, University of Judaism

In this workshop, we will discuss, by way of analyzing Biblical and talmudic texts and commentaries and excerpts from the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, the principles for creating justice in urban centers and the impact that these principles might have on urban planning. All texts will be in English translation.

In this session we split into pairs to study two texts, one from the Mishna and one from Gemara. The texts focused on justice in relationship to obligation and response to one another. The texts dealt with the obligations that a person has to his/her community. We concluded, based on these texts, that a city must not shut out the voices of the oppressed, but must include these voices in communal conversations.

The Sleeping Giant: Organizing Synagogues for Power and Change

Facilitators: Karla Van Praag, Jewish Community Relations Council-Boston, Adele Brown, Jewish Community Action, and Julie Weill, Jewish Fund for Justice

This workshop will explore the unique potential power that synagogues have to effect change and the unexpected benefits that organized synagogues reap through their engagement in social justice. Participants will hear about successful case studies, learn how to conduct a power analysis of a synagogue, and build skills for moving congregations from soup kitchens to social change.

This workshop covered the following themes:

- *Why the Jewish social justice movement need synagogues and vice versa*
- *What we can engage synagogues in*
- *How synagogue life and social justice movements can both strengthen the other*
- *Power analysis of synagogues*
- *Case studies of synagogues involved in social justice work*
- *Discussion of the challenges we are facing in doing this work*

Creating a Human Rights Advocacy Agenda

Facilitators: David Cohen, Advocacy Institute, Carole Steele, Coalition to Protect Public Housing, and Noah Leavitt, Jewish Council on Urban Affairs

Advocates for progressive urban policies are beginning to use human rights law and a “rights-based approach” to advance their campaigns. Facilitators will share several examples of the ways in which advocates and grassroots organizers are creatively deploying this strategy to fight poverty, racism and other injustices. We will share how public housing residents in Chicago are conducting a human rights campaign to prevent the demolition of their community by the local housing authority.

David Cohen suggested that a rights-based approach:

- *Has passion behind it*
- *Empowers, amasses power*
- *Obligates government to respect and fulfill individuals’ rights*

He said that we are beginning to see a change in state and local governments – they are beginning to recognize more issues in a human rights framework

Carol Steele talked about the affordable housing crisis in Chicago. There used to be three emergency shelters; now there are fourteen. Residents cry is – don't tear down until you redevelop. Don't displace. In Chicago, 14,000 units of housing have been torn down and only 1,900 have been rebuilt.

At first, it seemed that this was just a housing issue, but when families are displaced, more issues arises such as education – (children who are removed from schools and have to start over loose valuable learning time)She talked about getting people to help low-income residents fight to stay in their own communities.

Noah Leavitt talked about the ways in which the Coalition to Protect Public Housing is using human rights law to fight teardowns. Group invited UN Rep to Cabrini to see what cuts have done in Chicago (visited 4/04) - The UN Rep referred to Cabrini Green as an “Urban Apartheid”. Carol Steele Testified before the OAS

Engaging Teens in Activism and Tikkun Olam

Facilitators: Daniel Rothner (Areyvut), Pella Schafer (founder of Jewish Youth for Community Action), Keren Rosenbaum (Spark Partnership for Service)

Representatives from Jewish Youth for Community Action (JYCA), Areyvut and spark: Partnership for Service will highlight best practices of their programs. They will lead interactive exercises that will explore ways that you can involve teens in the activism and service learning work that you do.

Pella Schafer guided participants “active listening” exercises relating to Jewish social justice identity and spoke about the ways in which active listening can be part of involving teenagers in social justice. Daniel Rothner spoke about the need to involve teens and tweens from the beginning of a project in order to give students a sense of ownership. He offered models of framing projects in a Jewish way and of incorporating social justice into the day school curriculum. Keren Rosenbaum talked about connecting service learning and critical reflection to larger social issues about which teens are aware. Group discussed piece by Ram Das on doing charitable work within a synagogue. Group discussed ways to empower teens by involving them in hiring staff, planning programs, etc.

Building Jewish Diversity

Facilitators: Rabbi Capers Funnye (Beth Shalom B'nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation), Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz (Jews for Racial and Economic Justice)

Rabbi Capers Funnye and activist/writer Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz will approach the theme of Building Jewish Diversity from two distinct perspectives. Capers will focus on the ideal of opening our doors and hearts making the synagogue a welcoming place. Melanie will focus on the impact of doing anti-racist work from a perspective that includes Jewish racial and cultural diversity. Some questions we'll raise for discussion include: What does diversity mean in the Jewish world? How do minority/majority factor in? What does power have to do with diversity? What do we mean by an open heart? What is the goal, the point of attempting to increase diversity?

Rabbi Funnye opened by describing his efforts to develop African American Jewish community on Chicago's south side, and Kaye/Kantrowitz read excerpts from her forthcoming book about Jewish ethnic diversity. Participants discussed challenges in making their organizations and congregations inclusive spaces for non-Ashkenazi Jews and Jews of color -- or alternately, in building respectful relationships with organizations and congregations that are made up mainly of non-Ashkenazi Jews and Jews of color. Emphasis was placed on the need to make space for the leadership, decision-making power, and autonomy of these constituencies, and to take on their needs and issues, rather than to simply expect them to integrate into the existing culture and programs of an institution.

Appendix B: Speakers' remarks

1) Opening remarks Jane Ramsey

Good morning. My name is Jane Ramsey and I am the executive director of the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs. On behalf of JCUA's remarkable conference chair, Evely Laser Shlensky, our board, associate division and staff, it is my pleasure to welcome you to Chicago. Today marks what we hope will be a landmark conference that strengthens the Jewish commitment to justice in our cities.

this conference is the culmination of much hard work over the past year, led by Evely, and the conference committee. Thank you, Evely, for your gracious and strong leadership and thank you to each of our committee members. As well, it would not be possible without the extraordinary work of our staff, coordinated by Rabbi Jill Jacobs with the exceptional assistance of Jennifer Jennings. Would JCUA's staff please stand? Please note, if you need assistance over the next two days, look for staff name tags in (color).

Significantly, this conference would not have happened without our 18 partner organizations from around the country. Their names are listed in your program books. Permit me to give special thanks to several who worked diligently with the conference committee: Michael Brown, Nancy Kaufman, Vic Rosenthal, David Rosenn, Daniel Sokatch and Peter Dreier. And none of this was possible without the strong support and commitment of Jennie Rosenn and the Nathan Cummings Foundation.

This past year has marked significant anniversaries in the civil rights movement. It was the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. The Board of Education*; the 40th anniversary of the passage of the civil rights act of 1964 and the voting rights act of 1965.

In Chicago, 2004 also marked the 40th year of the Jewish council on urban affairs. Born out of the civil rights movement and founded by Rabbi Robert J. Marx, JCUA has combated poverty, racism and anti-semitism in partnership with Chicago's diverse communities. Informed by our Jewish values, JCUA works to support the empowerment of low income and disenfranchised (minority) communities, build broad coalitions to advocate around issues of injustice, and educate and mobilize the Jewish community in order to create a more just city.

As we discussed how to appropriately celebrate these past 40 years and look to a future of social change, we reflected upon the growth around the country of Jewish social justice activism. At the same time, we recognized the dangerous escalation of regressive national policies attempting to turn back the very landmarks whose passage we have just celebrated.

Our coming together signifies a substantial opportunity and obligation. As **progressive** Jews we must create a movement that will forge relationships with others across the country, battle reactionary forces, and *create communities, a nation and a world that reflect our Judaic values and a vision for justice.*

Over the next two days we look forward to sharing ideas that will move our Jewish community, enable us to organize with the many diverse communities that comprise our cities, and hear analyses of issues confronting us. Most importantly, these two days lay the groundwork for collaborative working relationships, and the growth of a strong national Jewish social justice movement.

We must act to reverse perilous trends and we need to act now. At the same time, we must be patient and tenacious in planting the seeds, growing our organizations, and ***creating a strong, broad, democratic Jewish constituency steeped in progressive values.***

We look forward to creating new friendships, strengthening existing alliances, and laying the groundwork for the growth of our movement.

The best answer to the well-organized and financed right is our own careful, deliberate organizing. As the Hebrew folk song states, “you and I can change the world.”

Please enjoy and have fun. We ordered and had delivered Chicago’s best weather, (in a long while) just for you!

It is now my pleasure to introduce you to Rabbi Robert J. Marx. His credentials are too many to fully enumerate. Briefly, Rabbi Marx earned a Ph.D from Yale. He was ordained at Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion. He is the founding rabbi and Rabbi emeritus of Congregation Hakafa. He is the immediate past president of Interfaith Worker Justice. He is wise, compassionate and courageous, the founder of the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, Rabbi, Robert J. Marx.

2) A Challenge and an Opportunity Rabbi Robert J. Marx

I welcome you most heartily to what could well be a significant moment in the unfolding history of the American Jewish Community. I had intended to offer these remarks spontaneously so that they could reflect the real joy and pride I feel in seeing us all together. Jane Ramsey, however, importuned me to write down my remarks, ostensibly so that they could be part of the permanent record of this conference; actually, I suspect, to guarantee that I would not exceed the time allotted to me.

Jane has another concern, and a thoughtful one. Everyone here is an expert in a unique way—and none of us has perfect answers. It is important for us not to lecture to one another, but to listen to one another, to learn from one another, and to emerge from our time together with clearer insight and even with greater dedication. And wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could leave this conference as advocates for one another’s program, rather than vaunting our own?

There are three simple ideas that I would like to explore with you. They represent areas that I am sure you have thought about, but I feel it important that we re-examine them as we begin our work together.

The first is that we are Jewish. I assert this obvious truth, because so often the very idea of social justice becomes relegated to a back row of the Jewish community’s agenda. Judaism, of course; is a blend of many voices. All too often these voices have admonished us to regard physical survival as our primary community task. This week we will listen to other voices, voices that call to us out of our people’s history, voices that reflect both the past and the future of the Jewish experience. They are the echoes of Amos and Isaiah. They are the staccato words of the Bible

demanding over and over again that we remember the poor, that we remember our own oppression in the Land of Egypt, that we share our food with the hungry and provide homes for the homeless.

The challenge I am addressing is neither as simple nor toothless as one might suppose. As Jews, we have often found it difficult to navigate these waters—to sail between the Scylla that tempts us to take “justice” for granted and the Charybdis which wants us believe that other interests are more vital to our survival. Our concern with justice urges us to set aside both complacency and fear and powerfully assert that there is something gloriously Jewish in our task. What could be more faithful to Judaism than to stand in the shoes of the other, the one who is not blessed with the same economic or social privileges which we enjoy? There are prophets and rabbinic sources that can help us with this task. They need to be freed from the dungeon of our lapsed collective memory.

To create justice in our world we need to take a second step, and again the inspiration for this second step is deeply rooted in our own tradition. And now, frankly, I am about to confess to my own bias. We need to form stronger and more conscious alliances with community groups. Over 800 year ago Maimonides told us how to do it. He simply said that the highest form of charity is to help people help themselves. Many of us are trying to do just that. The task is more difficult than it sounds.

I would hope that we could develop more programs in which we provide staff and help and daily communication with the people who live in our cities. There are community groups thirsting for the alliances which we can offer. There are men and women, neighborhood associations, struggling for a voice, struggling for justice, and we can learn to help them. Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish was centuries ahead of his time when he taught his students this lesson: “Lending money to the poor is greater than merely giving charity,” he said. “But entering into a partnership with the poor is greater than either.”

We need to listen. Sometimes that is a difficult thing to do—even for a people whose watchword is *Shema*—listen Israel. We are great at organizing. We have an easy time telling others how to do it. We have trouble listening.

What I am suggesting is not a one way process. Just as this week you and I need to learn from one another, so too, is there much to learn from those who are struggling to have their voices heard in our cities. There is a danger in assuming that our inner cities are sick places, that they need cures. In reality, there is strength and courage in our cities that we need to understand and appreciate. The historic move of Jews away from inner city areas has made the task of really understanding that much harder.

I have become wary of the slogan that increasingly has been attached to Jewish social action projects. The term *tikkun olam*, repairing the world, implies brokenness, a defect in our world. Look more closely. There are tremendous strengths that have to be understood and supported. If there is a sickness it is the sickness of those who refuse to measure their own capital gains against the losses which their selfishness engenders.

We may rightly be concerned about the quality of life in our tenements. “Tear them down,” the experts say. “They are dangerous places-- breeding grounds for crime!” What all of us experts forget, is that there are people who live in those developments—fathers and mothers and children. They sing in their church choir—in the neighborhood. They serve as nurses in the church nursing corps—in the neighborhood. They play basketball on the playgrounds—in the neighborhood. They do not want to be “*cattel-ized*” even as they do not want their neighborhoods to be cannibalized.

Too often our Jewish organizations, including some of the most helpful have fallen victim to a bias that convinces us that our role is to teach or to tell the poor how to improve their lot. To assume that powerless people do not have ideas about what is good for them is to exacerbate the

differences that separate us from one another. We can learn to listen, and to offer our help, not as analysts descending from some academy on high, but as true allies—and above all, as friends.

We may not all be comfortable with the third topic that I would urge us to keep in our thoughts. That is anti-Semitism. Jewish social concerns have always been tinged with utilitarianism as well as with altruism. We are convinced that the good deeds we do will redound to the credit of the Jewish community. “Look at the good things we are doing. How can anyone hate us?”

And yet Jewish history tells us that the specter of anti-Semitism lurks behind much of what Jews think and do. We have historically misunderstood the uses of anti-Semitism. The poison of religious passion combined with the politics of poverty is a historic formula that threatens our people. But it is my contention that we have been blind to both the utilitarian role that anti-Semitism has historically occupied, and to the opportunities that lie in an understanding of our own interstitial role. Between the parts, between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, we learned to build our own hospitals, create our own country clubs. But we seldom came to grips with the powerful impact of anti-Semitism upon our thinking.

Both the Jewish psyche and Jewish resources are still latently if not manifestly dominated by the ghosts of anti-Semitism. A look beneath the surface reveals its continuing impact upon our organizational agenda. Our money goes to defense, to defense agencies, to the defense of Israel, to concerns about anti-Semitism in France and Europe. We have become so inured to these defense issues that we seldom question the financial dominance they have achieved in our community.

Anxiety about anti-Semitism even impinges upon the way we form our communal partnerships. The roster of our community associates must be more kosher than their agenda. Someone may appear on the program who once criticized Israel. “Better not go to that meeting!” A member of the Nation of Islam? “Forget it!”

And when Jewish fund raisers are asked to support community organizing, they often respond with underwhelming exasperation: What does that have to do with Judaism? Their real question is: What are you doing for poor Jews or aged Jews, or Jewish education, or the defense of Israel, or with anti-Semitism? And we must ask: what is missing in this litany of limitations? It is justice. It is concern for a job that pays a living wage, for health insurance, for good schools, for safety, for justice. “Justice, Justice, shalt thou pursue” – God’s powerful command still conveys its compelling message.

How shall we defend the Jewish community? Our defense involves more than committing our resources to the agencies and the politician who we think will protect us. Nor is the alternative to this posture to be found solely in learning how to remove *hametz* in the right way.

We need not denigrate the role of our defense agencies, nor ridicule the Mitzvah Wagons. Concern for the poor, concern for the worker, concern for a balance between power and powerlessness, rich and poor, are historic and important components of a vital and dynamic Judaism.

It is important to add, that, while we all are sensitive to the daily needs of individual men and women and children, our agenda is nevertheless different from that of our federations and welfare funds—and this difference can—and often does—lead to conflict. Our Jewish Federations are well occupied with their task of feeding the hungry and caring for the aged. But the mission of this conference lies elsewhere. It is to question power, to seek mega change, to be concerned with how systems work, as well as how they come up short. Our mission is to build on the strengths and insights that the powerless themselves possess, and to bring our own strengths and insights to help. We confront anti-Semitism in an effective way, and we confront our Judaism in a glorious way.

We have come full circle. Concern for the powerless is apparent in the earliest moments of our people's enslavement in Egypt. How to challenge power remains one of the most difficult tasks that anyone could ever contemplate. We are a people with a memory. We know what it is to suffer. And we also know how blessed we are in so many profound ways. Let us—at this conference-- vow to combine the memory with the blessing as we seek to create a society that is truly just.

3) Redemption songs

By Evelyn Laser Shlensky

I imagine that most of us have come to this gathering because Judaism, as we understand it, or simply our lives as Jews, impels us to wish for and work for a world more decent than the one we know. As for me, that wish and that work shape my religious path.

Tamara Eskenazi, Professor of Bible at Hebrew Union College, teaches that Ancient Israel's unique contribution to the development of religion was not so much the idea of ethical monotheism (as many of us learned in religious school). Ethical monotheism, she points out, had precedent in Zoroastrianism. The distinctive gift was, rather, the redemptive hope, the vision of a world that would be reconstituted through justice and mercy.

In these times, I've been feeling a need for redemptive hope.

And so my attention was caught recently by a couple of pieces, one an article by John Powers, writing in the L.A. Weekly, the other an address by Bill Moyers. Both speak, in their own language, of the redemptive hope.

Powers insists that the Left must try to reclaim utopia. Says Powers, "Back in the horrors of mid-20th Century Germany, the great...philosopher Ernest Bloch wrote, 'This is not a time to be without wishes.' He knew that any successful political action had to begin in hopes and dreams. The same is true," says Powers, "as we enter the second Bush administration...We have to regain the hopeful belief that we are trying to create a world thrillingly better than the one we now live in." "Thrillingly better" strikes me as the stuff of which redemptive dreams are made. Not tinkering, but something considerably more imaginative, let us say, more Prophetic.

Moyers frames his yearning for a more hopeful future this way: "On the heath Lear asks Gloucester: 'How do you see the world?'" And Gloucester, who is blind, answers, 'I see it feelingly.' Moyers continues: I see it feelingly. The news is not good these days. I can tell you, though, that as a journalist I know the news is never the end of the story. The news can be the truth that sets us free—not only to feel, but to fight for the future we want. And the will to fight is the antidote to despair...What we need," reasons Moyers, "to match the science of human health is what the ancient Israelites called *hochma*—the science of the heart...the capacity to see...to feel...and then to act...as if the future depended on you. Believe me," he concludes, "it does."

To be a religious person, for me means to cast my lot with the Jewish dream of redemption: to see, to feel, and to act with reference to that dream. Our redemptive dream has us reconfiguring this awesome, often degraded planet, into a place of peace and justice and compassion. I imagine us

going forth from this gathering, seeing new possibilities for connecting heaven and earth, by which I mean, linking heavenly values with earthly needs.

I want to offer a couple of supports from our religious tradition that may help us to both construct and sustain that linkage.

I'll start with one that invites imagination on a regular basis. We Jews have been gifted with Shabbat. The association between our day of rest and our imaginative life opens worlds of possibilities. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan in his book, Sabbath: Day of Eternity, wrote: "The Sabbath is a rehearsal for revolution." I love the idea of rehearsing for revolution on the Day of Rest. One of the features I find most satisfying about Shabbat is the opportunity to envision—I do most of my envisioning on Shabbat walks—to envision the world thrillingly transformed until it approaches the one we think God must have wanted. And with havdallah, separation from the Sabbath, we go forth, renewed, to participate in the work of redemption, revolutionary work when it is done right.

The next text and interpretation are particularly important to me. Much of my work involves me with synagogue social action. Most synagogue activists understand that *gemilut chasadim*, that is, deeds of loving kindness, are inherently religious. Generally, it is less evident to them that advocacy, that is, action to alter things, also is rooted deeply in our religious tradition. Yet the Hebrew Bible is replete with exemplary advocates as well as mandates to alter things.

Here is one such mandate:

"When your brother is brought low and his means falter relative to yours, strengthen him--whether he be a stranger or a resident--that he may live with you. (Lev. 25:35)

According to Rabbi David Rosenn, "Typically, our responses to poverty fulfill only one part of this verse's mandate. Providing food to the hungry and shelter to the homeless ensures that they will live. But Leviticus 25:35 challenges us to look beyond these temporary measures and ask how we can strengthen people so they are able live *with us*, not thanks to us.

This is not a time to be without wishes, and certainly not without plans. May this gathering be our launching place, the place where we, a community of Progressive Jews, join hands and spirits to Let Justice Dwell There, dwell here, across this land. Together we can imagine a future that will be thrillingly different than the present. Let us work toward that future, pooling our voices, our experience, and our "science of the heart." As we go forth in such a way, we can surely strengthen the possibilities for a society in which our neighbors are more likely to live with us--than thanks to us.

I leave you with a short redemptive poem by Adrienne Rich:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save
So much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those who,
age after age, perversely
with no extraordinary power

Reconstitute the world

4) Remarks

By Leonard Fein

I want to begin this morning by calling your attention to the grand secret we share with one another, and noting that the indolents outside this room— I say “indolents” because if we define ourselves as activists that would appear to be the appropriate term for those who are not one of us, unless we prefer to call them “non-activists,” which would have approximately the same relationship to us as “non-Jews” has to the Jews, which is to say that very few if any so called “non-Jews” are aware that that is what they are, just as “non-activists” do not so define themselves – but call them what you will, they are not privy to our shared secret.

I cannot and would not try to catalogue the diverse reasons that have caused us to live our lives as we have, to choose social justice activism in a Jewish context as our work. Some of us are the daughters of rabbis, others the sons of old-time lefties; some are penitents, some are rebels. Some were genetically chosen, others environmentally conditioned. There are myriad private motives that have brought us to the public engagements that matter so much to us.

But whatever the diversity of motive, there is one thing that for sure connects us all, this notwithstanding our reputation “out there” for self-sacrifice, the often grudging admiration accorded us for our saintliness or our foolishness or both, for our idealism or our naiveté, for our readiness to work for far less compensation than we might command in the private sector, to inhabit offices rather less than spiffy and enjoy expense accounts rather less than lavish than might be thought appropriate for ambitious Jews.

We, of course, know better. The truth, and this is our justifiably well-guarded secret, is we do what we do because we enjoy it, because it gives us pride and pleasure, because as frustrating as it often is it is still more often satisfying, dramatically more satisfying than it is frustrating, because it feels right to blend purpose and passion, because lending our hands to the tikunning of the olam is as close to holiness as most of us will ever come. Let them imagine that the different drummer to whose beat we march pounds out a dirge; we hear the ratatat of the snare drum, we are what Martin Luther King called “drum majors for justice.”

And that, specifically, is why I am so happy to be here at this conference, and so happy to have the chance to say a few words here this morning.

The words I have to say are, thankfully, not about what makes our work Jewish. Those words I have spoken some hundreds of times – spoken, argued, declaimed, orated – but here, presumably, there is no need to repeat them. You know those words as well as I.

I want instead to focus my remarks on the external impediments to our work, the detours and blockades we encounter in our steadfast pursuit of justice. These, it seems to me, come in three major categories.

The first is situational and has to do with the sheer magnitude of the issues we confront. Lamentably, the scope of those issues goes on and on, and it is daunting indeed. In Africa, for example, more than 330 million people, a third more than in 1990, subsist on less than one dollar a

day. Three hundred and thirty million people is 10 percent more than the current population of the United States. Around the world, the number rises from 330 million to a billion. In our government's effort lend a hand, the United States provides some \$15 billion a year in aid, which is roughly one-thirtieth of the Pentagon budget, one-eight of one percent of our gross domestic product. Or: The minimum wage in the United States remains stuck at \$5.15 an hour, which in real terms is a few pennies less than it was in 1960 and well below the peak it reached in 1968. A worker working full time at the current federal minimum wage earns some 30 percent under the poverty line. Or, to be precise, is you work full-time for a full year at minimum wage, after your contribution to FICA is deducted, you end up with \$9,512.05 for your labors. There has been no increase in the federal minimum wage since 1996, a period, incidentally, during which Congress has raised its own salaries by \$28,5500. Or: There is ongoing genocide in Darfur. Or: Forty percent of America's fourth graders are reading below grade level and will most likely never catch up. Or, or, or – except these are not “ors,” these are “ands,” and they give rise to two nagging questions that each of us confronts: How in the world do we do the triage that tells us with which of these myriad issues to intervene, and once we have chosen, whether according to our own idiosyncratic interests or according to the theory of low-hanging fruit or according to whatever it is that guides our choices, how in the world do we intervene effectively? The difference between what the United States would be paying were it paying its full share of the United Nations Millennium Project, which seeks to reduce global poverty and hunger by half by 2015, and what the United States is actually paying, would be fully covered with a reversal of the Bush first-term tax cuts for those earning more than \$500 thousand a year. Or it would be paid for by every American contributing less than the cost of buying a cappuccino at Starbucks once a week. How can we possibly make that or anything even remotely approximating that happen?

Enough of statistics which are no more than people with their tears wiped dry.

On a good day in our work, we experience victory – but our victories are grains of sand in what feels like an ongoing tsunami of affliction. How, knowing what we know, do we avoid a dispiriting sense of futility?

The second, and related, impediment is political – specifically, the current political situation here in America. Not a day goes by without further insult and further injury to even the most modest of our goals. The combination of Republican triumphalism and Democratic confusion, an Administration that seems to spend half its time in cover-ups and the other half in outright lying, a federal judiciary long in peril and now under assault, torture in our name, tax cuts to the wealthy in our name, an assault on science – this is, after all, a president who has told us that “the jury is still out” in the argument between scientists, which is to say, evolutionists, and creationists – and so on and so forth without regret and without restraint. The safety net, never all that sturdy, long-since frayed, now on its way to being shredded, the New Deal and its offspring rendered a quaint memory, perhaps one day deserving of its own Williamsburg or Sturbridge Village memorializing the way we were, once upon a time. How, seeing what we see, do we avoid a demoralizing sense of futility?

But it is the third impediment I really want to focus on. It is less political, less situational, more, if you will, existential.

Modernity, some say, was born on the streets of Paris in 1789. While that is plainly an oversimplification, it turns out to be not only a convenient starting point for a consideration of modernity but also a provocative point. For what happened in Paris in July of 1789 was not only

the birth of the idea of progress but also, soon after, the birth of the guillotine. And nothing recaptures the twin legacy of those days of exultation and trembling better than the perplexing history of the 20th century, that century which witnessed an expansion of knowledge unprecedented since the day that Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree and which at the same time witnessed a level of dehumanization and of slaughter that render us mute and forever shamed.

Nor is there compelling reason to suppose that the record of the new still infant century will prove any nobler.

Against that background, how can the optimism that so recently informed us be sustained? Is the notion of progress merely a conceit or a consolation, without empirical foundation? Is it, heaven forbid, a lie?

The idea of progress has been so central an assumption of our lives that it has nearly axiomatic status. Broadly, the unfolding realization that scientific progress was a permanent aspect of contemporary human life gave rise to the belief, often explicit, that moral progress, too, could be assumed. The future would surely be better than the past. Man would one day be redeemed, a belief not only of Orthodox Christians but also of secular humanists. There is sin, and eventually there is salvation; there is injustice, and then eventually there is justice. The alternative is simply too terrible to contemplate.

Even now, even after Cambodia and Rwanda, even after Bosnia and Sierra Leone, even after Auschwitz, we cannot bring ourselves to let go of the idea. Redemption may await the hand of God or it may be the fruit of human action, but redemption, we persist in believing, surely awaits.

That is, I think, a fair description of the prevailing wisdom.

But Jews, it seems to me, have our own and somewhat different take on the matter of progress.

I leave aside here the formal Orthodox view, according to which each generation since the revelation at Sinai has been an ever-paler imitation of its predecessor, just as I set aside the obverse assumption that so informs the modern perspective, the one that holds that each generation is inevitably an improvement on its predecessor.

To understand the Jewish view, it helps to distinguish between two systems of knowledge, a distinction plainly neglected by those who make a religion of rationality, those who suppose that every conflict between thesis and antithesis will sooner or later be resolved into a synthesis, a distinction neglected and rejected as well by the Biblical literalists.

Scientific knowledge is manifestly cumulative. A graduate student in physics at MIT today knows more physics than Einstein ever knew, surely more than Isaac Newton. Darwin, bold genius that he was, knew nothing of DNA and RNA, could not have imagined I dare say the genome project. But Saul Bellow, alav hashalom, did not know, whatever “know” means in this context, more about writing than Shakespeare or Milton knew, and Heschel did not know more than Isaiah. Beethoven knew no more than King David, and Duke Ellington knew no more than Beethoven. Science is mainly linear, art and ethics meander, twist and turn and pirouette and see truth that science has never dreamed.

It is because science emerged as all-knowing and all-powerful in the 20th century that it was so widely supposed at mid-century that religion would soon wither away. And it is because science is now so widely seen as double-edged, because it is science that has brought us open heart surgery and science that has brought us smart bombs and all the rest that all around the world masses of people turn away from science to faith, as if only the one or the other can be true. Science responds to our needs and to our curiosities, and science answers many questions, but science does not answer the questions most people ask. So people turn to the arts for answers, and among the arts, principally to religion.

And Judaism?

I do not think I am wrong to say that Judaism does not come to answer questions that are otherwise unanswered; that is the work of science. Judaism comes to ask questions that might otherwise be neglected; that is the work of religion

That Judaism does not offer answers, not at any rate easy answers, becomes clear from both our doctrinal texts and our the historical experience. In both, the notion of binary choice is rejected in favor of a world of enduring tensions not meant to be resolved but to be recognized and internalized. The yetzer ra, the evil instinct, coexists with the yetzer tov, the instinct for good; we are enjoined to choose life, but we are promised death; there is Exile and there is Redemption, and no great wall separates the two; there is kodesh and there is chol, the sacred and the mundane, and we live in both. Judaism, as I understand it, is filled with such tensions, rich in nuance. We have justice and we have mercy, universalism and particularism; we value personal autonomy and social cohesion; we seek both freedom from arbitrary power and the avoidance of chaos.

We reject the naïve optimism of not only Marx but of John Stuart Mill, of the Reform rabbinate of just a few decades back and of John Dewey, but that does not mean we accept the grim verdict of Thomas Hobbes. Unlike Socrates, we know too much, far too much, to accept that knowledge and virtue necessarily go together. We know too much, far too much, to think sorrow is always deserved or that tragedy can forever be put down. There is no other world, neither up above nor down here, below, where perfect harmony is possible. Harmony? Only on “that day,” the End of Days, when history ends. History began the moment we ate from the Tree, at the very beginning of the story we tell, and what we learn from that episode and from everything we have experienced since is that the companion of knowledge is not virtue but mortality.

So what is left? Is there no better day around the corner?

What is left, in a word, is politics. Our truths are always tentative; it is the questions and not the answers that endure, else a priesthood would suffice. And politics is not about redemption; it is about getting through until tomorrow. It is about doing what we can to bar the guillotine, knowing that what we can do will never be quite enough, perhaps not even nearly enough.

What is left is what there has always been: the conviction that though ours is not to complete the task, neither are we free to desist from it.

And why is that? Why persist in our effort? Do we think ourselves reincarnations of King Canute, who sought to hold back the tide?

But there's the rub. When on a beach in Southampton, Canute had his soldiers bring him a chair and then ordered the tide to roll back, it was not hubris that impelled him. Quite the contrary: He was tired of his soldiers' flattery, and he meant to teach them that there were limits to his power.

We cannot roll back the tide. But we can inspire, we can heal, we can mend, we can postpone the evil decree even if we cannot rescind it, we can learn and practice empathy, and even when all that does not add up to social change, which now and then it does and will, it helps abate the pain, it offers sweet honey to offset the irritating thorn.

Those are not small things. The oxygen of religion is not faith, it is hope, and even if hope be assaulted by the diverse pollutants of our time, perhaps especially as it is assaulted by those pollutants, we dare not add our voices to the prophets of glum and gloom; even if the respiration we promote be artificial, we must see to it that people still breathe, and breathe deep, of hope.

And, finally, therefore, how can we, who know how perilous is the journey, ourselves retain our vigor?

We have two ways: One is to see ourselves as if we personally were among those redeemed out of bondage, that we personally have been transformed from slaves into free men and women, and surely there is no greater source of hope than that, which we have ourselves experienced.

And when even that is not enough, there is this: We have each other. Look around. Look at what others in this room are doing, day-in, day-out, and against what odds – and *then* say, if you dare, there's no foundation for hope.

The terrible roll calls of Auschwitz required the prisoners to form up hours before dawn and stand at attention for two hours and more in their thin rags, through the rain and the snow, and again in the evening, sometimes for three and four hours, now and then through the night. Some died on the spot, some contracted pneumonia, and some – some fell from exhaustion. To fall and be noticed by an SS man meant to be beaten or shot. And so the universal practice among prisoners was to use their own bodies to prop up those no longer able to stand. Here, for example, is one testimony:

Turning my face slightly over to the right, I saw the unconscious body of Federweiss propped up straight, squeezed tightly between the bodies of the two men in front and behind him. The man in the rear held him up by his trousers, while the one in front pushed his back on Federweiss's chest to prevent him from dropping. They kept these positions for quite a while, until the S.S. man was at a safe distance.

We live neither in the valley of the shadow of death nor atop the mountain of redemption, we live in a desert of shifting sands where the best that we can do as we seek to cross to a better place and a better time is to press our bodies against those who falter and are about to faint, hold each other close and upright until we come to the next resting place, there to regather our energy and then to resume our journey.

5) Closing remarks
Jane Ramsey

Thank you David and Jill.

Thank you all for being with us and for your commitments as we move forward.

We have spent a remarkable 2 days together – sharing and learning. There is a palpable spirit in the room - of hope, of visions for our Jewish community and how we as a Jewish people can bring justice to our world.

What a remarkable gathering of social justice activists from around the country! We have reason to be particularly hopeful with the large numbers and dedication of the young people who are here with us. As well we are guided by the wisdom of those with us who have long toiled in the vineyards to bring a Jewish voice to the struggles for justice.

We have challenged ourselves to build a movement, understanding the grave issues that confront our community, our nation and our world.

We recognize that the path is not without obstacles and conflicts, but it is with the knowledge that the prophets have had great success working through the millennia, creating a new agenda. As David, Peter, Leibel, and Evely reminded us, great changes have been achieved over the past century. Without question, great changes will take place over the next century. It is up to us to determine what vision we bring to our world, what changes we will work to achieve.

Rabbi Marx challenged us to listen and to work to empower communities, with particular attention to those most oppressed. As we bring a strong, active Jewish voice to coalitions cutting across racial, economic, religious and ethnic divides, we do so understanding our interstitial role as the people in between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless. In aligning with those most oppressed we act in our own self-interest and in the spirit of the prophets we serve justice.

Let us commit as we leave here today to work tenaciously with a long view to the future. The steps we take as catalysts for change will reverberate – some immediately, some in the more distant yet foreseeable future, and some only foreseeable for generations to come.

We are so much stronger as we leave here today – greater as a whole than the sum of our individual parts.

Now as we leave here together today we do so in solidarity with the workers at the Congress Hotel who have long struggled for fair wages, benefits and a voice in their own future. May we act each day as we do today to make our prophetic challenge that justice justice shalt we pursue.