Jews in a Non-Jewish World

View PDF



Dr. Shorenstein served as Chair of the Board of the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York. This article appeared in issue 2 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

I. Introduction

Many of you will remember Rabbi Israel Miller, not only a wise and righteous man but also an individual of great commitment to the community. He once gave a dvar Torah on the importance of Jews engaging in communal affairs which, his son, Michael Miller, the CEO of the Jewish Community Relations Council, recently shared with me.

"In the portion Vayeira, in the Book of Breishit, Genesis, chapter 18, verse 24, Abraham is negotiating with G-d in an effort to save the wicked city of Sodom and its inhabitants.

Abraham says: Perhaps, if there are fifty righteous within the city, will you destroy and not forgive the place for the fifty righteous who dwell there?

G-d answers: If I find in Sodom fifty righteous, within the city, I will forgive the entire place for their sake.
Why doesn't G-d just say that if he finds in Sodom the 50, he'll forgive the entire place?
Why does G-d add "within the city"? Why the need for those three seemingly superflouous words?
The great Chassidic master, Rabbi Simcha Bunim (of Pshischa) gave the following explanation:

G-d was saying that it is not enough that there be righteous sitting on the benches of the Study Hall. Yes, they are important. But, what G-d was seeking were the righteous who were "within the city, " intermingled with their fellow G-dly creations, engaged in the realities of the world, and yet, nonetheless, they remained righteous. Only then would G-d "forgive the entire place for their sake."

We, for the sake of the future of our community, of the Jewish people, of course need the bench sitters in the Study Halls -- our teachers and rabbis.

But, for there to be a Jewish tomorrow, we must also produce righteous on another level - "within the city" - fully meshed, interwoven, coalesced with the other inhabitants, wrestling with, delving into, addressing, remedying the difficult challenges of today we collectively face in our world, our environment, and out cities ..."

II. Personal

I am fortunate that for most of my adult life I have been involved in Jewish community relations -- as a grass roots organizer, as an elected official, as the lay head of numerous groups that focus on the relationship between the Jewish and greater American community, and now as the Chairman of the Board of the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York, which is the culmination of being able to give back to our people on the local level. JCRC is the resource, voice and behind the scenes mediator of relations between our people and all others in the NY area.

I have made this commitment and engaged in these activities for two reasons:

o tikkun olam - part of our responsibility in being part of the world is not only to repair the broken pieces of society but to build relationships to increase the quality of life for all **and**

o also to ensure a dignified existence for our people dependent increasingly on our relationships in our **communities** - that is, more than just society at large.

III. Facts of Communities

o More than 180 ethnic, religious and language groups living in the NY Metropolitan area and who are no longer the minority but the emerging majorities

o Dwindling numbers in growing, more fully diversified world. As others increasing and becoming more powerful -- Chinese, Koreans, Dominicans, Mexicans and other Latinos -- we need to survive and thrive in a different and transforming society.

o That society, especially for aging and impoverished Jews, is one in which the percentage of the social service and funding pie is becoming smaller and our needs are becoming greater. Invisibility of Jews living in poverty, requiring health care, needing support services.

o Issues of communality have to be cultivated for a sustainable and positive relationship -- a relationship that not only supports inter-group understanding but that also naturally allows for resource sharing.

o Would like to talk about the manifestations of the two fold commitment: building relationships and securing benefits for our people in an increasingly diverse city.

IV. Building Relationships - not kumbaya of the 1960's but recognition that there is real diversity now in the city and there is no history in a lot of our communities about Judaism and, for that matter, civil rights movement

o What there are: hate crimes and hate speech

- Hate crimes rose by 52% against blacks and 35% against Jews in NYC in the last year; incidences around the city that people unaware of- swastikas, renewed incidences in Crown Heights

o JCRC programs to

a. Inform and train policy and decision makers in the public and private sectors to effectively respond to the complex needs of a growing and increasingly heterogeneous population

b. Improve relations in communities between long-time residents and newcomers

c. Mentor, Monitor, Teach and Provide Start Up funds for new communities based on coalitions

d. Empower the communal leadership of the diverse communities comprising New York City to work together

- Started with outreach to Muslim community in aftermath of 9/11
- Created statement condemning terrorism and hatred - signed on by more than 350 city-wide and community based organizations representing the diversity of our city - published in 6 languages
- Utilized a coalition network to conduct community based seminars on grief counseling triage, conflict resolution, and inter-group relations
- WE ARE ALL BROOKLYN - is now a coalition of more than 50 community and faith based organizations based in Brooklyn dedicated to making this new diversity work by helping leaders to learn with one another to solve practical problems - 150,000 Orthodox Jews; 60-80,000 Pakistanis
- YOUTH BRIDGE -trains a cadre of the top teen leaders in New York from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds in skills they will need to be New York City's next generation of CEOs, heads of non-profit organizations, directors of governmental agencies
- PSA program under CAUSE NY - group, Commissioner Kelly, JCRC response, next steps in program

V. Securing a Secure and Dignified Life for our People

o Social responsibility has tended to turn inward - becoming a matter of personal choice rather than collective obligation. Grown used to delegating such responsibilities to governments and to impersonal agencies instead of personal involvement.
But, it is written in Isaiah chapter 1, verse 17: "Learn to do good, seek justice, aid the oppressed. Uphold the rights of the orphan, defend the cause of the widow." If we do not do that for our own people, providing for their needs, and preserving their dignity, then shame on us.

o Limited funding and increased competition for support: poor, elderly, physically challenged, for those requiring health care

o JCRC programs include health care coalitions and support service coalitions for seniors -- not direct services but mobilization of communities to act collectively and creatively to receive resources they need

a. Health Coalitions - Northern Queens Health Coalition, Greater Southern Brooklyn Health Coalition, Staten Island Health Coalition, The Lower Manhattan Health Care Coalition

-- Greater Southern Brooklyn Health Coalition: Convened representatives from 90 community organizations, all major health care providers and HMOs in several conferences and public forums with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Have become a lead agency for 12 of its members in enrollment in Child Health Plus.

b. Economic Development for Women, Senior Citizens

-- Far Rockaway Women's Economic Empowerment Project: trains and educates community and faith leadership on the issues and solutions to the cycle of poverty plaguing their community.

In addition, voter mobilization and outreach to NYC agencies to ensure representation.

VI. Closing

In closing, would like to quote from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' book "To Heal a Fractured World."

"The message of our Bible is that serving G-d and serving our fellow human beings are inseparably linked, and the split between the two impoverishes both. Unless the holy leads us outward toward the good, and the good leads us back, for renewal, to the holy, the creative energies of faith run dry. For six days, so the first chapter of Genesis tells us, G-d created a universe and pronounced it good. On the seventh day he made a stillness in the turning world and declared it holy. Unless we reconnect the holy and the good we do less than justice to the unity that is the hallmark of our monothesism."