

SEVENTH WORLD CONFERENCE OF JEWISH COMMUNAL SERVICE: UNITY AND CONTINUITY Jerusalem, Israel, July 2-7, 1989

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The Seventh World Conference of Jewish Communal Service had the good fortune to presage the momentous events that have changed the face of Eastern Europe and its remaining Jewish communities while precipitating a mass migration to the Jewish homeland. In one of the closing sessions, representatives of Soviet Jewry pleaded for help in rebuilding their Jewish communities. They were joined by colleagues from Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Yugoslavia. Little did we know at that time that we were witnessing the beginning of a new era.

The World Conference, once known as the International Conference, was founded after the Six-Day War to help North American Jewish communal professionals become better acquainted with our co-workers in Israel. The founders felt that the experience and wisdom of Jewish communal workers worldwide could be brought together into one organization for the betterment of all. Its mission was to upgrade professional standards throughout the Jewish world while responding to the excitement of an Israel reborn and triumphant.

During the previous six World Conferences, we made progress in fulfilling our mission. Through these Conferences a networking system has been developed that has allowed us to draw upon experiences throughout the Jewish world, from Australia to Belgium, New York to Jerusalem. Today, there is a global Jewish civil service. We share common concerns and a feeling of *Klal Yisrael*. Every segment of our profession strives to meet the same needs of an

aging population, greater Jewish mobility, the second generation of Holocaust survivors, and other concerns.

CONFERENCE THEME: UNITY AND CONTINUITY

The theme of the 1989 Conference reflected this spirit of commonality and moved to the next step: "Responding to the Crisis in Jewish Unity and Continuity: The Vital Role of Jewish Communal Service." Its subtitle was "The Challenge of Transmitting Jewish Knowledge, Values, and Experience in a World of Dramatic Change." The Conference planners recognized that, although members of our profession do work together and possess a common language, there are divisive issues that affect all Jewish communities throughout the world. We acknowledged that, although Israel unites us, it also provides the basis for conflicts that can divide us. The Conference therefore added a new aspect to its traditional format—an opportunity to discuss the meaning of political issues in our professional programming. We talked about religious pluralism in Jewish life and Israel and the Palestinians. Our wrap-up, however, focused on "Israel and the Diaspora—Working Together."

The Conference program was built as an inverted triangle, moving from the general to the specific. It opened with an outstanding address by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, who spoke on the Conference theme. Rabbi Steinsaltz, in his very being, epitomizes the Jewish "Everyman." He demanded that

we Jewish communal professionals ask our community leaders for far more involvement, that we never say their efforts are "enough." The next day, Mendel Kaplan, speaking from his vantage point as chair of the Jewish Agency Board of Governors, described a changing Jewish world facing different opportunities as the superpowers reduce the level of their confrontation. We spent hours reviewing our responsibilities to Jews on the move—the need to create new community services and to meet expanding needs. Clearly, the agenda of Jewish communal service had grown as a result of recent world events.

PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES SESSION

An innovation during the 1989 Conference was the scheduling of the first series of six professional activity sessions immediately after the initial plenary meetings in which the conference theme was interpreted. These sessions dealt with the meaning and application of the theme as presented by the plenary speakers to the specialized interests and roles of the respective groups of professionals. They also provided opportunities for early socialization between kindred professionals.

The discussions at the sessions made one point strikingly clear. Although each of the communities in which the professionals worked differed in a variety of ways, all professionals were concerned about the level of Jewishness in their respective settings. The increasing rates of intermarriage and "fallout" from Jewish life were of major concern for all participants. There was recognition of the need to upgrade communal workers' own Judaic knowledge, level of Jewish practice, and ability to reach clients Jewishly. Jewish service agencies, it was felt, must become more involved in "Judaization" activities even as they dispense needed human services to their clients; thus, they would become, in a *practical sense*, dual goal enterprises: embracing both Judaic and professional service.

The professional activity sessions on the following day offered an exciting opportunity to the participants. These sessions were held at Israeli service agencies including an institution serving the aged in a suburb of Jerusalem, a kibbutz specializing in the educational and cultural adjustment of new olim, and an agency responding to the vocational needs of Soviet immigrants. The program at each site featured a hands-on experience emphasizing the unique Israeli aspects of the professionals' work and an in-depth discussion of a major program and/or issue relating to the specific professional field.

During these sessions, the consensus of participants was that Israel must be viewed as a centripetal force for Jewish communal professionals. On the one hand, Israel and its variety of educational institutions and opportunities should be utilized to enrich the Judaic background of professionals through short-term and long-term education programs. The Jewish Welfare Board in the United States and Jewish education agencies throughout the world provide examples of how to take advantage of Israel as a Judaic enrichment resource. Too, Israel, despite its current internal problems, which many viewed as part and parcel of its growing pains, should be viewed in the perspective of Jewish national revival and hope and promise of Jewish continuity.

Dr. Alvin Schiff (USA) was chair and Shaul Lilach (Israel) co-chair of the Professional Activity Sessions.

There were additional innovations during the 4 days we spent together. Two sets of "Lunch and Learn" sessions permitted the 450 delegates to use their lunch break in a constructive manner. Our hosts on the Israel Committee developed a series of Jerusalem encounters—thematic learning tours that provided us with unique opportunities to explore the "off the normal track" Jerusalem.

The exciting forum on Holocaust survivors that galvanized the Sixth Conference was followed up by a plenary during this

gathering on "Shoah, Memory, Meaning, and Affirmation." Workshops then applied the lessons learned to practical situations.

Every hour was filled with many opportunities both to meet and make new friends and to learn. As we have found in the past, we discovered that there is much more that unites us than separates us, that our problems are similar no matter in what country we practice, and that in spite of difficulties the future was bright.

ROLE OF THE WORLD CONFERENCE

Questions were raised, however, regarding the role of the World Conference. During a dramatic session on the opening of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe, their delegates called for "person-to-person" assistance to their communities. We were asked to visit, provide personnel, and offer educational experiences—in essence to be a supportive contact during the months ahead. Of course, our colleagues at the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) have the professional responsibility to provide such aid, but at some point WCJCS leadership should consider its own role in helping these Eastern European Jewish communities.

During one plenary session and at both Board of Directors meetings, delegates from South America pleaded, no demanded, that WCJCS find ways to participate in their struggle to professionalize. Esther Leah Ritz, during the session on "Lay Lead-

ers and Professionals," was encouraging in her survey of professionals in communal service, which she reported from her vantage point as a Past President of the World Confederation of YMHAs. She mentioned improved professional training, increased recognition by lay leaders, and higher salaries as goals being pursued actively. Whether and how WCJCS can or should reorganize to provide ongoing support services or better opportunities for dialogue during the years between conferences has yet to be decided. What was clear this July was the demands for increased activity.

These 4 days were the result of 4 years of planning by an International Committee that met in New York, Paris, and Jerusalem. We owe many colleagues special thanks for their extraordinary contributions, most of all Yehuda Dominitz and Florence Mittwoch of Israel. A number of international organizations were extremely helpful in providing us with assistance and the means to carry out our programs: Bank Leumi Le Israel, Jewish National Fund, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, Jewish Agency for Israel, and United Israel Appeal.

During the closing plenary when we elected Art Rotman, president, and Zvi Fein, associate president, we listened to Natan Scharansky reaffirm that the free Jewish world had just increased in size but Jerusalem remains its heart.

We look forward to seeing you again in 1993.