

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY POST SEPTEMBER 11

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Dr. Ruskay had the responsibility of leading the New York City Jewish community as it responded to and coped with the tragedy of September 11. He recognized that a community's ability to surmount a tragedy of that scale was only as good as the communal infrastructure it had already put in place.

Dr. Ruskay's observations are applicable to all communities, and his insights are therefore included in this special Philadelphia edition.

*Dr. Harold S. Goldman, President
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As American Jews today, we face at least five challenges.

1. The consequences of September 11: the loss of our firm sense of security and all that entails
2. An economic recession, which is being felt in every sector of American life
3. The as-yet uncertain effects of unprecedented "impulse giving" and what it means for a system predicated on the values and importance of federated giving
4. The intensely complicated international position Israel currently occupies; entering the second year of the intifada. How can we be most helpful?
5. The very real questions that surround issues of Jewish identity. For the past two decades, we have frequently described ourselves as "post-Holocaust" and "post Israel at risk." As Jonathan Rosen recently suggested in an important *New York Times Magazine* article, unwelcome echoes have returned from a period we thought had passed.

As fate would have it, I was in Israel on September 11. That morning, we were visit-

ing the Israel Trauma Center in Gilo, to which we had provided resources to help Israel in its response to terror. By nightfall, the Israel Trauma Center was in our hotel, where it remained for three days, to help us—an extraordinary example of the global Jewish community.

This article considers the implications of September 11 for our federations and our communities.

For more than a decade, we have struggled to discern and learn from the findings of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS). Those findings profoundly shaped my perspective on how we can and should mobilize ourselves to strengthen and build "inspired" communities. While we once could take for granted Jewish families, Jewish neighborhoods, and external social barriers that—when taken together—fostered Jewish community and individual identity, the open society of America presents new challenges. To meet these challenges, federations are taking steps to strengthen Jewish education and undertake initiatives to make it possible for far larger numbers of our young to participate in the most effective modes of *informal* Jewish education: Israel trips, summer camps, and youth groups.

However, we cannot rely on Jewish education alone to carry the burden of the Jewish future. People will only be motivated to ac-

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quire Jewish skills and knowledge when they experience living, vibrant, inspired Jewish communities. People need to see with their eyes and experience with their hearts that joining this endeavor instills life with a powerful sense of meaning, purpose, and *kedusha* (holiness). There is much that we can do to make federations a more effective—and thus more valued—resource for the creation of such inspired communities.

We must go further, creating *compassionate and caring* communities. For while inspired communities connect us vertically with meaning, purpose, and, for many, God, caring communities can strengthen the web of horizontal connections with one another.

A national survey concluded last week asked the following question: “Which, if any, Jewish institutions did you turn to for support and solace after the attacks on September 11?” While the largest category—over 45 percent—indicated that they turned to *no* Jewish institution, 3 percent cited a Jewish social service agency, 4 percent a federation, 3 percent a Jewish school, and 2 percent a Hillel. Over three times the number who turned to all the other Jewish institutions *combined*—38 percent—turned to their local synagogue.

This finding confirm what we already knew—while global and national community is essential for our global mission, the sources of ongoing commitment to which people turn in times of joy and crisis alike are decidedly *local*. For those not raised in identified families and committed communities, synagogues, JCCs, Hillels, and schools are the critical contexts for fostering identity and commitment.

We call these institutions “gateway institutions” for they are the primary places that people of all backgrounds use to gain access to our community. Despite the tremendous accomplishments we have made in strengthening JCCs and Hillels, revitalizing our synagogues, and facilitating the proliferation of Jewish day schools, we need to get far better at making these gateways more inclusive and accessible. Let us acknowledge that nearly

50 percent of Jews did not turn to any Jewish institution in the days and weeks after the crisis. We will expand the reach of our gateway institutions not only by improving on what they already do so well but also by expanding the definitions of what they offer and how they do it.

This challenge to our gateway institutions also faces our human service agencies. For the last century, federations—through an unparalleled network of agencies and, more recently, in partnership with government—have provided critical human services and the infrastructure to support them. No one does it better, and no other ethnic or religious group has created a comparable network of human service agencies that serves every age group and population.

On September 11 and in the weeks that followed, we witnessed in New York the extraordinary power of this network. On the morning of the disaster, the Educational Alliance in Lower Manhattan, just blocks from Ground Zero, set up an impromptu triage center, treating victims and shuttling them to nearby hospitals. A nearby day care center was evacuated and the Alliance took care of those children, not knowing when or if the children would be picked up.

Similar stories of true heroism and devotion within our agency system continue to pour in from throughout the New York area. The Jewish Board of Family and Children’s Services (JBFCS) and FECS have now been on the front lines for two months, providing trauma support and counseling to New York City police, fire fighters, EMS workers, and scores of businesses devastated by this disaster. They have set up walk-in clinics so anyone can come and speak with a trained professional. Every agency in New York’s network undertook Herculean efforts to serve, reassure, and care.

How can we build on this incredible record and capacity to provide services so our network can become a far stronger resource for community building in our gateway institutions? By seizing the opportunity to bring social services to synagogues, JCCs,

Hillels and schools rather than expecting their members to always come to our agencies. By better linking our gateway institutions with the professionals and expertise that distinguish our human service agencies.

It is time to intensify and explode the linkages between gateway institutions and the agencies that provide human services. In this way, we will extend the centers of a caring community, meet expanded numbers of Jews "where they're at," and provide them with improved access to the tremendous compassionate resources we offer. In this way we can intensify community at the places where Jews gather, thus merging and reinforcing our Jewish renewal and human services missions.

In New York, we have started to expand those linkages. For example, we are significantly increasing the number of social workers from our human service agencies working in JCCs and synagogues to strengthen their range of services. On Long Island, the FECS "Partners in Caring" program is providing an array of human services in synagogues, and Westchester Jewish Community Services is doing the same in its community. JBFCS is partnering with synagogues in our Agency/Synagogue Poverty Initiative. These are just a few examples of the type of resource sharing and cooperation that, if multiplied, can assume a far larger role in redefining the very nature of our community. But these examples—and I could cite many others taking place in communities across the country—constitute only the first steps.

In a recent *New York Times* op-ed piece, Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*, observed, "A durable community cannot be built on images of disaster, however vivid or memorable. It arises from individual acts of concern and solidarity." He continues by saying that "this will not happen spontaneously." It happens only with government support and encouragement. Although federations are not governments, we can assume a far larger role in this effort to facilitate and encourage caring and inspired communities.

One of the unintended results of having

the highest quality network of human service agencies is that, in a sense, we have "professionalized" Hesed. With agencies that do so much and help so many, we have unintentionally squeezed much of "volunteer" Hesed off to the side. Yet one of the things that has always characterized Jewish life is how we care for one another. This duty must not be assigned only to agencies. We need to reclaim the most basic *mitzvot*—visiting the sick, caring for the infirm, comforting the mourner—on the individual and family levels, as an ingredient by which we can create a more intensive and engaging sense of togetherness and community. Through our gateway institutions, working together with human service agencies, we can do this. We should welcome, endorse, and support the emerging focus on service and volunteerism to utilize these precious resources.

One of my colleagues, Roberta Leiner, developed an acronym that sums up this goal. Particularly in light of September 11, we must utilize our *Naturally Occurring Assets for Community Health and Healing*, or NOACH. Why do I think that NOACH is a useful acronym? Because this is exactly what the biblical Noach did. At the onset of the flood, Noach preserved life by conserving natural resources. So too in our time, we have tremendous "naturally occurring assets"—our agencies, our synagogues and schools, our families, volunteers, and professionals—and by intensifying the web of relationships, we will strengthen our communities.

In the aftermath of the World Trade Center tragedy, we observed and experienced the incredible desire of millions to personally volunteer and help in any way possible. People wanted to do something—anything—to offer their strength to the community. People also need to heal. Volunteering enables people to do both at the same time, and people "got" this on what appeared to be almost a cellular level. As a result, within 24 hours New York had to close its blood banks and volunteer banks. As a community, we can develop new ways to capitalize upon this

incredible resource—the desire of Jews to reach out, extend a hand, and help one another. Either we will tap this potential, or others will.

We now have identified some key areas where federation can be a far stronger force: enhancing the strength of our gateway institutions, aggressively connecting our human services with these gateways, and mobilizing the spirit of volunteerism so evident post-9/11. To this I want to add a final challenge, one no less important: *We must better communicate who we are, what we stand for, and what we aspire to become.* While millions of people currently use our services, large segments of our community have yet to become acquainted with what our federations and agencies do and what we represent.

We must communicate far more effectively the power of an integrated network and explain—in plain terms and with concrete, real-life examples—why our enterprise is unparalleled as a vehicle for both collective responsibility and community building. We must make the case that supporting our network through the annual campaign—the quintessential embodiment of sustaining philanthropy—in fact constitutes impact philanthropy, in ordinary times as well as in times of crisis. This is what we observed on September 11. And we must help others see this as we rescue 50,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union, respond to the needs of Jews in Buenos Aires, help Ethiopian Jews in Israel achieve social and economic equality, and, through the efforts of our network of agencies, help individuals and families in need, every day. We were effective on 9/11 because of the capacity of our network on 9/10.

For far too many years, we have talked about all these issues—at General Assemblies, at national meetings, at planning conferences, and in other settings. But change has been slow. The status quo has inertia on its side. Undeniably, change is hard. But the message of September 11 requires no less of us.

As federations, we can be a powerful resource—an engine for the creation of pow-

erful community—if we will it to be so. Let us take bold steps in creating a community of inspiration that will provide larger sectors of our people with meaning and purpose. And let us resolve to build a community of care, one that truly understands our sacred obligation to be involved actively in repairing our world nationally, internationally, and locally.

September 11 must serve as a clarion call. As we struggle with the issues that have emerged from that infamous day, let us internalize its lessons. For our children and the generations beyond, we must now take bold steps to actualize our rhetorical commitment to strengthen community, to go beyond providing services to create inspired and caring communities. As Robert Putnam pointed out, creating such caring and inspired communities will not happen spontaneously. Federations will be critical in making this happen.

I conclude with what I consider a most important lesson of September 11, which is, in fact, the same lesson we re-learn each day as Jews: *Express and foster gratitude.* We awake every day and recite, “*Modeh ani lifanecha*”—I thank you, God, for giving me this day. Since September 11, we are ever more aware of the gift and blessing of life.

Blessings come in all shapes and sizes. Let us vow not to let them go unnoticed. Who were the heroes of 9/11? Mayor Giuliani, to be sure. But also the men and women who serve in the ranks of the New York City police department, fire department, and EMS, the ones who risk their lives daily to rescue others, who truly deserve our honor and gratitude. And since 9/11, let us add the postal workers.

If we are to learn fully from 9/11, as federations and as communities, we must also honor those who serve on *our* front lines in the creation of inspired and caring communities. In addition to philanthropic leaders, let us honor the social workers, teachers, rabbis, and caseworkers who are often both under-compensated and under-acknowledged.

We live in difficult times, ones that, to a

large degree, would have seemed unimaginable before September 11. But we must never forget that our people's name, *Yisrael*, is derived from the phrase "struggling with God." Our task is not easy, but we must commit to building on the excellence of our service delivery system and thus take even

more seriously our commitment to community building in its many facets. With a spirit of purpose and a vision for the future of our people, let us recommit to do so. In this way, the lessons from 9/11 will help us affirm light in the midst of darkness, as our people have done throughout history.