

Jewish Telegraphic Agency
April 18, 2005

Jewish activists get together to launch coalition for social justice

By Sue Fishkoff

PACIFIC GROVE, Calif., April 17 (JTA) — More than 250 Jewish activists have launched what they hope will become a national Jewish voice for social justice — but whether the new group will succeed where earlier efforts have failed remains an open question.

The “Justice Shall Dwell There” conference, held April 10-11 in Chicago in honor of the 40th anniversary of the Chicago-based Jewish Council for Urban Affairs, brought together dozens of Jewish groups working for economic and political justice for two days of workshops and networking.

The groups that came together have been working on the local level in cities from Alaska to Boston fighting slum landlords, speaking out against sweatshops, supporting low-wage workers and immigrant rights and forging alliances with Hispanic and African-American community organizations. Many of the groups are less than five years old; conference organizers see that as evidence of a groundswell of Jewish interest in this kind of work.

Organizers believed it was time to bring these local efforts together and provide a collaborative network to share “best practices” and resources, helping each other to grow locally; and a national voice to speak out against injustice, in the name of Judaism’s prophetic tradition.

“There are Jewish movements for social justice bubbling up around the country,” said Jane Ramsey, JCUA executive director and a co-organizer of the conference. “We’ve been in conversation with these groups as they emerge, and we believe a coordinated, strong national Jewish voice for social justice, in partnership with others, can change the direction this country is going.”

The timing of this initiative is not accidental, Ramsey said.

“We see regressive national policies regarding the domestic urban agenda, and we do not feel the current administration respects the social justice agenda,” she said.

“I want to see us build a powerful Jewish presence for the work we do,” said Vic Rosenthal, executive director of Jewish Community Action in Minneapolis. “I want to see Jews join a campaign on issues across state boundaries, on the budget, race issues, poverty issues.”

It’s just an additional way to activate your Judaism and practice real tikkun olam, said Daniel Sokatch, executive director of the L.A.-based Progressive Jewish Alliance.

“The Jewish community is often very good at the service piece, at getting people to work in soup kitchens, and is less good at asking the critical question, ‘Why are these people hungry?’ ” he said.

Rosenthal believes a national network of social action groups can complement social service efforts undertaken by synagogue groups. The latter engage Jews who already are affiliated, he points out; activist groups like his own draw in Jews who often have not affiliated, and allows them to work for social change from a Jewish perspective.

That's particularly true, activist leaders say, when it comes to unaffiliated Jews in their 20s and early 30s, a demographic that was very much in evidence at the conference.

"There was tremendous energy in the room," said attorney Mark Pelavin, associate director of the Reform movement's Religious Action Center in Washington. At 44, Pelavin admitted he felt a little old in Chicago — something that never happens, he said, at the Jewish events he usually attends.

"There are a lot of people for whom social action can be the gateway for involvement in the Jewish community, a doorway into their synagogue," he said. "It's particularly true for young people because there are fewer doors open for them."

But Pelavin wasn't eager to see a national social justice movement emerge.

"What is encouraging is not the potential for creating a national voice on social issues, but the expansion of these local voices and ways for them to work collaboratively," he said. "There doesn't need to be an overarching structure."

Local groups get their power from the fact that they're indigenous, he continued. They're known in their communities, which helps them tackle local issues; they can feel their strength more on the local level.

Even those who are spearheading the call for a unified Jewish national voice concede that it will be difficult to build and sustain. If at all, they say, it will come about in organic fashion.

At the last conference session, participants were asked to stand up and say what they'd like to see the group do in the future. Anyone who called out a suggestion became the head of a new national working group, responsible for keeping in touch with everyone who signed up for his or her group.

"My expectations were fairly minimal," Sokatch said. "What emerged was a general willingness to move the process forward, without a precise blueprint of how to do that."

Ramsey added that the initiative will not be coercive: The JCUA may come up with pieces of legislation it wants to fight, and will reach out to other Jewish social action groups around the country for their support, but those groups can choose to opt in or out of each campaign.

One piece missing from the conference was the organized Jewish world. Nancy Kaufman, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Boston, was the lone representative of what she called the "establishment," and that didn't make her happy.

“I believe that social justice is a mainstream idea, as much a part of our Jewish identity as the Jewish education and caring agendas,” she said. “The good news is that I saw amazing energy and excitement” at the conference. The bad news is that the organized Jewish community was not there, and I was really troubled by that.”

This isn't the first time there has been an effort to start a national Jewish social justice movement: In 1996, the Nathan Cummings Foundation funded a similar effort, involving many of the same people who headed up the Chicago conference. Called Amos, after the biblical prophet, the initiative got off the ground in 2000 and lasted barely two years.

Rabbi Jennie Rosenn, program director for Jewish life and values at Cummings, which also funded the Chicago conference, believes the new effort has a better chance.

“It's different in that we're not looking to create a new national organization,” she said. “It won't be so much a unified approach or movement as a shared and amplified voice for social justice.”

And this time, Sokatch and Ramsey pledged, the larger, better-established groups like their own will take leadership roles and ensure that the process keeps moving forward.

“I've been on the phone nonstop since Chicago, talking to people across the country,” Sokatch said.

“We're very serious about making this happen, and there will be many follow-up meetings,” Ramsey said. “We're talking about hard work for years to come.”

The imperative to ensure justice for the non-Jewish downtrodden — referred to in many speeches and workshops at the Chicago conference — was put into action April 11 as the conference concluded.

More than 100 participants marched to Chicago's Congress Plaza Hotel, where low-wage workers have been on strike for 22 months to protest salary and benefits cuts. A small delegation led by Rabbi Bruce Elder of Congregation Hakafah of Glencoe, Ill., entered the lobby and asked to speak to the hotel's owner or on-site manager, both of whom are Jewish.

“Given that the owner is Jewish and that this incredible travesty of justice is happening to workers who are not Jewish, our religious principles dictate it's wrong to oppress your workers,” said Elder, explaining why he thought the situation required a Jewish response.

The delegation was met by a security guard and threatened with arrest.

“I wasn't there to get arrested,” Elder said. “My intention is not to be confrontational. The fact that he doesn't want to meet with his fellow Jews, face to face, says something to me.”