

# Reaching Out

**When Henry Morgenthau asked Jacob Schiff for \$50,000 to help Palestinian Jews in 1914, he had no idea that he was in fact creating a global humanitarian organization: the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). Today, JDC (also known as 'the Joint') serves the needs of Jews in distress in over 70 countries and also provides emergency aid in Africa and Asia / Daniel Savery**

**S**peaking from his home in New Jersey, Steven Schwager, JDC's Chief Executive Officer, understands the importance of his task. "We are the overseas arm of the American Jewish community, the most generous and prosperous Jewish community in the history of the Diaspora. So we have a special responsibility," he says. "The biggest projects are reaching out to the unaffiliated Jews in the FSU (former Soviet Union) and continuing our work in Israel."

Before joining JDC over 20 years ago, Schwager worked in the New York City Controller's Office, where he learned about financial markets. He says that modern donors require their charities to act like businesses, with financial statements, transparency, accountability and independent evaluation.

Despite the current economic crisis, Schwager remains optimistic. "This year, the annual Greenberg dinner raised \$43 million, compared to \$40 million last year. In Philadelphia they are raising more money than ever before. In New York, we are saying 'those that can give should give more,'" he says. "I believe that we will recover from this shock, and philanthropy, which is a strong custom in America, will continue to be strong."

Arnon Mantver, Director of JDC-Israel, agrees: "In a financial crisis, as in any crisis, the poorest people suffer the most. It has always been our policy to deal with the neediest of the needy."

## Helping all sectors

Although often referred to as a flourishing economy, over 30% of Israel's children and elderly live in poverty, as do more than 50,000 Ethiopian-Israelis. In 1991, the JDC assisted in Operation Solomon, where 14,500 Ethiopian Jews were airlifted to Israel in El Al cargo planes to escape military rebels. These Ethiopian Jews can now benefit from JDC programs that help combat chronic unemployment and poverty. One such program, PACT (Parents and Children Together), operates in

14 cities throughout Israel. "PACT focuses on bringing kids into kindergarten, enriching their ability in the areas of language and mathematics, and helping families financially, but also educating parents on how to deal with their children in a new culture and country," explains Mantver.

Working alongside the Government, JDC-Israel also develops models to enhance care for Israelis with disabilities. In 2009, the organization will celebrate 40 years of its oldest partnership, JDC-Eshel, which provides care for the elderly. JDC-Israel also assists populations affected by the Second Lebanon War and people living in Sderot, while remaining non-partisan and apolitical. "We work with Israeli-Arabs, Palestinians and other countries in the Middle East," says Mantver. "We have one project called Echad, which focuses on early childhood education in the Arab community."



A little girl hugs "Hibuki" as part of JDC's emergency trauma counseling for children from Sderot and the Gaza border region

The fact that JDC is non-political has enabled it to work with a range of governments from Cuba to Syria - where there was once a Jewish community - and of course the FSU. In the FSU, which includes Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Russia, the Ukraine and many other countries. JDC works to foster self-sufficient communities and enables Jews to reconnect with their heritage.

## Focusing on the FSU

"Our best guess is that there are 1.5 million Jews living in the FSU today," says Schwager. "Collectively, through all of our programs, we touch around 500,000 Jews. If I'm right, that means there are a million Jews out there who are not yet connected with the Jewish people in any way, shape or form."

"We also work with 28,000 needy Jewish children in the FSU (in partnership with the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews) who live in the worst poverty imaginable - without a book, bed or winter coat," he adds. "These are children simply disconnected from the world."

Over the past 15 years, JDC has created 185 Hesed welfare centers in the FSU that provide material and emotional support to over 170,000 elderly Jews. "These are the poorest Jews on Earth," explains Schwager. He tells the sad tale of a 102-year-old Moldovan woman he met called Clara Cogan. "She lives on the fifth floor of a five-story building. Her husband died 25 years ago and her only son died 20 years ago. She hasn't been out of her apartment in 12 years because she can't walk down the stairs. We bring her food, medicine and clothing. The only people who come to visit her are the volunteers of the welfare center. This woman could be my grandmother and no one cares about her."

One of JDC's recent campaigns was to assist some of the 10,000-12,000 Jews who live in Georgia. On August 7th, 2008, the Russian-Georgian conflict erupted and within 24 hours JDC field staff launched rescue operations for hundreds of people. The organization advanced \$50,000 to the Georgian Red Cross and 300 displaced members of the Georgian Jewish community were welcomed at a Hesed center in Tbilisi. "In the true Jewish belief that all Jews are responsible for each other, many of the people we brought to Tbilisi stayed with relatives and friends there. About 100 had nowhere to stay and we put them up in hotels and shelters," says Schwager. "Now that the war is over, around 250 have gone back to their homes and 50 are homeless. Those who went back found that their homes had either been destroyed or stolen."

## Empowering women

Another major area of JDC activity is Latin America. In Argentina, an estimated 24,000



An elderly Jewish woman in the Former Soviet Union

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Jews were left impoverished, following a huge economic collapse in 2001. Seven years later, there are encouraging signs of economic recovery. Schwager admits that Argentina is one of his favorite Jewish communities in the world and describes it as "Judaism with tango."

An Argentinean program called Baby Help has been successful in helping young mothers struggling to care for their children. JDC aims to empower Jewish women worldwide. "The key to every strong society is to ensure that women become an integral part of the community," says Schwager. "Generally, we find that communities that empower women become stronger and more vibrant."

This year, JDC's WHEP (Women's Health Empowerment Program) celebrates its fifth year of partnership with Susan G. Komen for the Cure, the largest grassroots network of breast cancer survivors and activists. This innovative global movement encourages women to openly talk about breast cancer. Susan G. Komen, who started the initiative as a promise to her dying sister, is very proud of its global achievements, as facilitated by its partnership

with JDC. In accordance with the Jewish tradition of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), JDC's International Development Program (IDP) provides disaster relief, reconstruction and development assistance on a non-sectarian basis. For example, in the days following the 2004 Southeast Asian Tsunami, JDC raised \$18 million and continues to support those communities.

### More than just money

The Joint's core budget for 2007 was \$69.5 million, although it leveraged a total of \$352.8 million for projects worldwide. A vast proportion of the funding comes from United Jewish Communities (UJC), which represents over 400 independent Jewish communities across North America. Other major funding partners include the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, World Jewish Relief (UK), Canadian Jewry, government agencies and other international organizations. According to JDC's 2007 Annual Report entitled 'Global Partners for a Brighter

Future', \$159.3 million of the organization's budget was allocated to projects in Israel and \$119.6 million went to the FSU.

So what was this money spent on? A large proportion was spent on social and community development (22.2%), an extra 22.2% on services to the elderly, 19% on relief and welfare, 18.9% on Jewish education, 9.4% on health services, 2.5% on non-sectarian aid, 3.1% on manpower development, 2.1% on research and development and just 0.6% on religious activities.

There is no doubt that the Joint has been incredibly successful at fundraising and in the future it hopes to develop partnerships with a new generation of philanthropists in Israel. But the JDC has always been about more than just money. In 1947, Dr. Joseph J. Schwartz, then Director of the JDC, said: "In our hands lies a great responsibility that transcends all concepts of dollars and cents. We cannot rest and enjoy the good things of life as long as we know our brethren are in need."

This notion still runs through the heart of the JDC. "The Joint's goal is to make sure that no Jew goes to bed hungry at night," says Schwager. "We would hope that one day every Jewish community around the world could be free-standing and independent."

If you would like to make a contribution or receive further information on the JDC, please visit [www.jdc.org](http://www.jdc.org).