

Emerging Leader Presentation  
On JCPA Plenum

At JCRC Council meeting 3/9/2010

I am truly delighted to be standing here before you today as the recipient of the Barbara and Michael Newmark emerging leader award, which goes to show that one is never too old to emerge.

I can only begin to thank the Newmarks for their generosity and for this very great honor, for as the recipient of this award, I was privileged to attend the JCPA Plenum this year, which was held in Dallas Feb. 20, - 23. The theme of the 2010 Plenum was “B’Yachad: Building Bridges – Acting Together” And that concept was the thread that wove through the entire three day meeting, the idea of working together and building relationships with friends in the Jewish community and beyond.

For those of you who have never attended a JCPA Plenum, I will give you a brief overview. A plenum, by definition, is a meeting of a deliberative assembly in which all members are present. The Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA) is the national umbrella organization for fourteen national and 125 community member agencies (like our JCRC), and once a year brings its member agencies together for a rich and rewarding plenum meeting.

While the theme of building bridges and acting together was the written theme of our plenum, there were, additionally, many underlying themes. Throughout three very intense days of meetings, we were told that in order to carry our message forward, it is critical that we educate ourselves. In order to engage and disseminate what we have studied, we must continually be reaching for deeper knowledge and understanding. And there was the theme of Civility – how we learn to communicate and build a world with those whose ideas do not necessarily match ours.

And what a rich plethora of information we receive. We explore, debate and seek out the Jewish and political values behind a variety of issues including: advocating for Israel and Middle East Peace; mitigating the effects of the economic crisis; confronting poverty in America; Enhancing interfaith Relations; Promoting a Civil society; Protecting International Human Rights; and Working toward a greener, more energy efficient America.

The first day of the Plenum is primarily devoted to discussions about advocacy for Israel and the Israeli- Palestinian debate. We heard from Professor Kenneth Stein of Emory University. Professor Stein told delegates, “Don’t run, don’t hide, stay engaged and stay connected,” and urged us to continue our advocacy for Israel. He advised, “Merely being silent is not an answer. It is important for those who believe in the Jewish state or believe in its self-determination to act with vigor. That means staying engaged politically, knowing the history and confronting falsehoods.”

Emphasizing the necessity of being educated about the situation in Israel, Professor Stein told us, “It is important for Jews and non-Jews alike to know Israel’s relevance and importance. For many people, making the connection between Judaism and Israel is a difficult one. It has to do with the right of Jews to make their own choice to decide to be the subject of their own sentence and not the object of someone else’s sentence. Protecting this privilege and prerogative is what Jews have done in the last 60 years since the State of Israel was established.”

A visit from Israel’s Ambassador to the United States, Michael Oren, certainly constituted one of the highlights of the Plenum. Ambassador Oren focused on the theme of civility how do we speak? How do we listen? How do we act? What tone of voice do we use? Ambassador Oren told us that there is a global attempt to delegitimize Israel, and that our only hope is civility, both from our adversaries and from ourselves, that civility is the key to our survival. He said that a two-state solution would only work if the Palestinian State would not threaten Israel, and would not withhold legitimacy from us as a nation state of the Jewish people.

Day two of the plenum focused on domestic issues, interfaith relations and anti-Semitism. The theme of civility was carried through with a most engaging session featuring JCPA executive director, Rabbi Steve Gutow and Rev. Michael Kinnamon of the National Council of Churches of Christ USA, and formerly of Eden Seminary and has spoken to our JCRC. Long time friends and collaborators, Gutow and Kinnamon engaged in a lively (and civil) discussion of how Christians and Jews can come together and support a cause like Israel, and still maintain separate and different attitudes about certain issues. They spoke of creating a community of justice by uniting diversity into new unions.

And in the spirit of civility and offering a platform for differences to be expressed and addressed, a session titled, “America’s Future, Israel’s Future: 2010 Midterm Elections, showcased Ira Forman of the *National Jewish Democratic Council* with Noam Neusner of *30 Point Strategie*, polar opposites politically expressing what is, in their opinion, at stake for Israel and what is at stake for America in the fall elections. Both men agreed that partisanship has reached an unprecedented level and that the economy is at the root of our government’s problems.

St. Louis was well represented at the Plenum by a dynamic group of delegates who represented a broad spectrum of interests, a wide range of ages and all sharing the interest to learn more about the current state of affairs domestically and globally as it pertains to Jews. Our delegation was 16 strong, and sharing in this experience is both bonding and exhilarating. Our presence was also felt as our own Lynn Lyss, Steve Skrainka and our president, Gerry Greiman chaired workshop sessions, and our executive director Batya Abramson Goldstein was a speaker at the workshop, “**Practice What you Preach: A Community Relations Guide to Civil Discourse**”, and I participated as a speaker in a workshop titled, “**Kehilat Tzedek**”: **Beyond the Canned Food Drive**. In both of those sessions< Batya and I were able to represent the work of our St. Louis JCRC, our best practices, which we find are very highly regarded in the grand scheme of the JCPA. And David Bohm served as co-chair of the Resolutions Sessions, which I will tell you briefly about that. A special thanks to our staff member, in addition to Batya, Gail Weschler and Heather Papener, who so capably held our delegation together. And hats off to Mazon fellow, Orli Pinsberg who accompanied us on this trip.

The third day is spent voting on resolutions that we are charged to take home to our constituents and to carry forward in the work we do locally. While there is no mandate for adopting these resolutions into the work we do locally, the resolutions serve as wonderful guidelines for positioning ourselves on issues. This year the resolutions included:

Resolution on Breast Cancer Awareness and Treatment  
 Resolution on Civility  
 Resolution on Campaign to Delegitimize Israel through Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) Movement  
 Resolution on Falash Mura  
 Resolution on Food sustainability and Local Food Distribution  
 Resolution on Sexual Orientation Discrimination in the Military  
 Resolution on the On-going Humanitarian Crisis in Haiti  
 Resolution on Usury

Details of all of these resolutions and of the Plenum can be found on the JCPA website :

[www.jewishpublicaffairs.org](http://www.jewishpublicaffairs.org)

While I cannot begin to adequately share all of the information we gleaned in this very invigorating three-day meeting, I would be remiss not to mention a dynamic presentation by Abe Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League, and Hannah Rosenthal, U.S.State Department Special Envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism, and former JCPA Executive Director, both speakers passionate about the current state of anti-Semitism and the threats that are exploding globally.

Our closing speaker this year was Henry Cisneros, Former Secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, whose talk was titled, **Debts and Decision, Fears of Impending Poverty: the Fragile Middle Class.** Cisneros spoke of a two-fisted strategy: 1) Growth; and 2) Thoughtful, wise, prudent government intervention. He said there are four steps to economic recovery: fiscal stimulus; rescuing of the banks; addressing foreclosures and globally generating cooperation with other nations.

It was a whirlwind, very intense opportunity to attend the JCPA Plenum. There is a sense of energy that encircles the event and gives it life. And we leave, greatly enriched by having this shared experience with like-minded men and women who share the same values on domestic and international issues, and who have come together to learn and to carry that learning back to their homes to disseminate to their members and to the public. It is a memory that lingers for a very long time.