

NCJW-SF ANNUAL MEETING, BOARD INSTALLATION,
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Keynote Address, Rabbi Doug Kahn, Executive Director, Jewish Community Relations Council, and recipient, NCJW-SF Outstanding Visionary Award.

I guess I've begun reflective mode – as I contemplate retiring a year from now following 34 years at the JCRC. In part, I've been thinking about what led me to want to become a Jewish activist 50 years ago and how do we transmit these values to future generations better than we seem to be doing.

I am a product of the '60s. Four issues of tremendous moment unfolded for me at the same time – when I was 16 years old. It was 1967 and it was still the height of the civil rights movement, protests against the Vietnam War were reaching their heights, American Jewry embraced Israel as never before after the Six-Day War, and the Soviet Jewry a population of Jews long launched movement thought to be lost to the Jewish people. Civil Rights, Vietnam, Israel and Soviet Jewry – two universal issues, two particular issues (albeit with universal resonance) – and I refused to choose one over another. They all spoke to me. Loudly. But why?

I distill it down to four Jewish values that I learned primarily through my fairly non-observant but Jewishly-affiliated parents and my experiences at Jewish summer camp. (How many people got to go to a Jewish summer camp visited by Caesar Chavez and Joan Baez in the '60s)?

The first is the Biblical teaching, advanced throughout Jewish law, that all human beings are created in the image of God. My abhorrence of segregation was firstly fueled by that belief. It is, I would suggest, the same value that fuels NCJW's leadership against human trafficking. Any human behavior that devalues the worth of others is an affront. When such behavior is systematized – whether legally or not – it is an outrage that requires action. The concept that all human beings are created in the image of God carries with it an awesome responsibility to remove barriers, small and large.

This brings me to the second Jewish value that has played an important role in shaping my life. It is the Biblical injunction “You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.” As a young teenager, the book *While Six Million Died* by Arthur Morse

– a shocking revelation of how much was known in this country (in government, the media, and yes, in our own community) about the impending Holocaust and how weak the response was to the destruction of two-thirds of European Jewry – was my wake up call. It was what led me and numerous friends to cut our teeth as Soviet Jewry activists determined to learn the painful lessons of standing idly by during the Holocaust.

And one of those lessons was the importance of personalizing. It was not about millions of oppressed Jews in the Soviet Union who were faceless; it was about Ida Nudel and Vladimir Slepak and Natan Sharansky, and Alexander Lerner, and Boris Einbinder, the Soviet Jewish mathematician in Moscow I called every week to get the week's news (long before the internet), who despaired of ever being able to get a visa, who I ended up meeting as his family touched down at Ben Gurion Airport five days before the Yom Kippur War started and who joined me and friends at his first ever Passover Seder in freedom in Jerusalem). The campaign was one by one by one until more than a million of our people were free.

That commandment to not stand idly by, I know also drives NCJW's passion – for example in the face of ever-persistent threats to a woman's right to choose. No matter how great the odds – whoever thought the Soviet Union would open its doors when we first began – there can be no let-up and NCJW's commitment to fight to protect reproductive choice has no time limit.

The third and fourth values are Jewish concepts that specifically lead us to act to better the community and world around us. The idea of Tikkun Olam, repair of the world, stems from kabbalistic traditions regarding broken vessels trapping God's light and the need for us to be actors in bettering our world. I always view Tikkun Olam as the altruistic impulse that leads us to acts of social justice simply because it is the right thing to do. And the concept of "Mipnei Darchei Shalom" – a Talmudic requirement that means "for the sake of community peace or good neighborly relations" commands us to feed the non-Jewish hungry along with hungry Jews, clothe non-Jewish poor, along with Jewish poor, in short to pay attention to the needs of the broader community because in so doing it also protects the welfare of the Jewish community. If Tikkun Olam represents altruism, Mipnei Darchei Shalom represents enlightened self-interest. Both are motivators of Jewish engagement in social justice. For JCRC, its Jewish Coalition

for Literacy project with 400 tutors in the public schools helping children in K-3 grades who are struggling with reading become literate, represents a mix of these two values that complement each other. To volunteer to help a struggling child who, if he or she doesn't master reading by third grade faces tremendous challenges going forward in our world, is both an act of Tikkun Olam and an act of reaching beyond the Jewish community for the sake of good neighborly relations. NCJW's important advocacy for children born into poverty no doubt stems from a similar blending of Jewish social values.

The secret of our community's engagement on issues that affect the broader society is that we take on the issues of the day both because of our belief in Tikkun Olam and our belief in the concept of Mipnei Darchei Shalom.

It is my strong sense, from having the privilege of knowing and working with so many outstanding NCJW leaders over the years –including your national executive Nancy Kaufman who was my Boston-based JCRC colleague for so many years – that the four values that have shaped my life as an activist and that drew me to JCRC and have defined what JCRC is about, are values that speak to the work of NCJW and the people behind that work. To look at your agenda today – from civil rights to reproductive choice, from human trafficking to economic justice to protect the most vulnerable in our society – is to know that these same values inspire your work every day. And that is why I am genuinely honored to be recognized today along with the other distinguished honorees.

Now, we all know that this work never ends. And, at the same time, sometimes we are called on to do even more as a community. We are living in such a moment – a time of tremendous challenge. Here too, there is a Jewish concept that applies. It is the concept of the “exigencies of the time” – when circumstances require going beyond our every day actions.

This last year has seen an explosion of global anti-Semitism, in Europe and elsewhere, renewed conflict in the Middle East, and unprecedented anti-Israel activity in the Bay Area – including growing challenges on college campuses. This is not a business as usual moment.

Given the magnitude of the challenges, I am frequently asked, “shouldn't the

Jewish community focus all its energy on our particularistic agenda. We shouldn't spread ourselves too thin." Where does fighting poverty, anti abortion measures, international human rights abuse figure into the priorities when our community and Israel are under such global pressure and when there are many other groups that can take on these broader issues?

The concern comes from a good place. We have limited resources and should always ask the question – could someone else be taking up issue x, so we can focus on the particular concerns of our community.

The answer I generally give is this: We do need to dramatically step up our activism on behalf of Israel and in solidarity with Jewish communities worldwide that are experiencing anti-Semitism. It is an all-hands-on-deck moment and that includes organizations such as NCJW that may generally focus its attention on the broader social justice arena.

And, at the same time, it is more important than ever that we engage in the issues affecting the broader society. Why? First, our core values do not change. All four I cited, and more, are irreducible and command us. Secondly, when we look at the experience of American Jews compared to that of our brothers and sisters in many other countries, it is clearer than ever that our well-being as Jews is directly tied to the health and strength of the democratic institutions within our society, from quality public education to an independent judiciary, from separation of religion and state, to full civil rights for all – exactly the domestic agenda that NCJW proudly promotes. And thirdly, Israel's detractors have dramatically increased their outreach to diverse ethnic and religious communities, spewing anti-Israel hatred sometimes spilling over to anti-Semitism. If we absent ourselves from the coalition tables where enduring relationships are built, the vacuum will be filled by groups that do not wish us – or Israel – well. One example, since the Gaza War now almost a year ago, we have seen an astonishing growth of anti-Israel sentiment in segments of the African-American community, with the chants of "From Ferguson to Palestine" spreading from the Bay Area throughout the country and mainstream African-American groups like the student chapter of the NAACP at Stanford joining the divest-from-Israel coalition.

One key lesson we have learned from analyzing the last several years of anti-Israel activity in the Bay Area – the Jewish community has always abided by one of the unspoken rules of coalition-building, check your personal agenda at the door. And so when we fight for quality public education or immigration reform at JCRC, we do not walk into the coalition arena focused on persuading all present that Israel has a right to defend itself from enemies bent on its destruction. And, yet, by not educating our friends about the depth of our connection as American Jews to Israel, and about our profound support for the right of a Jewish and democratic state of Israel to exist in peace and security, or when we are silent about the scourge of rising anti-Semitism, we have missed an opportunity that has not been missed by Israel’s detractors.

Does this mean going into a coalition meeting on reproductive choice and saying, I want to start by talking about Israel; absolutely not. What it does mean is:

- a) NCJW’s ambassadorial role is more important than ever; and
- b) the relationships you build beyond the formal coalitions provide important opportunities to expose non-Jews to a holistic view of Jewish issues, from the more universal to the particular, and that our failure to share our concerns about these issues constitute a lost opportunity.

At every moment in time that we are do-ers, we are also educators – by what we share and by what we do not share. In this extraordinary time, every appropriate opportunity to share our concerns about threats to Israel and the Jewish world, along with our passion for our traditional social justice agenda, is an opportunity to seize. It’s not always easy – but it is part of what makes our, and your, work more important than ever.

JCRC and NCJW have, for decades, gone about their work inspired by Jewish values – so focused on pressing social needs that we seldom take the time to reflect on what those values are that motivate us. I’ve suggested four such values today that I think also have the potential to inspire younger generations of Jews as they have inspired us. The ways younger Jews affiliate may change, the ways they communicate may change, the specific issues that resonate may change, but the values are a constant and provide a building block for connecting future generations whose energy and commitment we count on to make a difference.

In a beautiful Midrash, a rabbi asks his students how they can tell when the night has ended and the day has begun. “Could it be,” one asked, “when you see an animal in the distance and can tell whether it’s a sheep or a dog?” “No,” answered the rabbi. Another asked, “Is it when you can look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it is a fig tree or a peach tree?” “No again” replied the rabbi.” “Then what is it?” the pupil demanded. The sage answered, “it is when you can look at the face of any man or woman or child and see that it is your sister or brother. Because if you cannot see this, it is still night.” NCJW helps make sure, even in these trying times, that we continue to see the face of every human being and to feel a human connection that compels us to act.

May NCJW which has made such a difference on so many issues that touch on the most vulnerable in our society and globally continue to go from strength to strength.