

SERVING JEWS WORLDWIDE FOR 95 YEARS

In 1914, the U.S. Ambassador to Turkey sent a cable to philanthropist Jacob H. Schiff asking for \$50,000 to feed starving Jews in Palestine. The money was raised and soon thereafter the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) was founded. Since then, JDC has touched the lives of millions of Jews in more than 85 countries and still today remains the “9-1-1 of the Jewish world,” transforming communities through its critical welfare, educational and Jewish renewal programming / Dan Zeller

Steven Schwager, JDC’s Chief Executive Officer, had a chat with ‘The Power of Giving’ about JDC’s work around the world and how it has touched him personally.

Q: JDC is celebrating its 95th anniversary. What are you most proud of?

A: Looking back on our 95 years, I would say I am proud that JDC has been there to help Jews around the world at every critical point in Jewish history this century. Indeed, today we are very fortunate that JDC’s reach extends to wherever there is a Jew in need. However, the world economic crisis has made life more difficult for many Jews across the globe, and we have to find a way to continue our critical work worldwide and reach those who are the poorest Jews on earth. After all, *kol Yisrael arevim zeh la zeh* - all Jews are responsible for one another - is not just a dictate, it’s our business model and it’s more important now than ever.

Q: You mentioned greater need among Jews worldwide. What sort of challenges are they facing?

A: Among the most vulnerable, there are thousands of destitute Jewish elderly in the former Soviet Union who wake up every morning having to decide between eating food or taking medicine. And tomorrow they will face the same dilemma. If this was your mother or father, would that be acceptable?

Similarly there are at least 25,000 Jewish children living far below the poverty line in the former Soviet Union as well as Central and Eastern Europe, and more than 300,000 Jewish children at risk in Israel. There is no excuse for Jewish children living in poverty anywhere, and particularly in the Jewish homeland.

In addition, there are emerging needs in places like the Ukraine, Russia and the Baltics. Jews who have worked hard for many years to reach middle-class status suddenly find themselves jobless or underemployed, unable to pay for food, rent, utilities and other basic needs. The global financial crisis has created new ranks of underserved and poor Jews whose needs may go unaddressed, leaving a new generation open to the possibility of poverty, illness and disconnection from Jewish life.

Q: What’s a favorite personal story of yours about someone helped by JDC?

A: I was in Kishinev, Moldova a number of years ago and made a home visit to a 90-plus year-old woman who lived on the top floor

JDC programs open doors to employment for young adults



In Israel, defeating poverty through employment

Every morning, when Tali wakes her three-year old son, Shai, sleeping next to her, the first thought on her mind is not breakfast. This young, single mother living in southern Tel Aviv is forced to treat food as more of a luxury. Using her monthly income of \$800 on rent, utilities, transportation, day care for Shai, health insurance and an abundance of debt payments, Tali’s future seemed hopeless. Determined to rescue herself and her son from financial despair, Tali joined JDC’s STRIVE Program, a partnership with Israel’s Ministry of Industry, Trade and Employment and the local municipalities encouraging young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds to achieve economic independence.

Thanks to STRIVE programming, Tali has opportunities to train with a personal coach, participate in workshops and begin vocational training. STRIVE counselors are even helping Tali negotiate her debts to get reduced interest rates from banks on past loans. Her current profession as a typist at an insurance company is a stepping stone, and she knows that completing her high school diploma will help catapult her down the path of success. Those close to Tali agree with her personal STRIVE coach, who says, “She has progressed beautifully with getting into the workplace and is constantly moving forward.”

STRIVE is part of JDC’s TEVET Employment Initiative, a partnership with the Government of Israel. TEVET has helped more than 35,000 Israeli citizens, who, like Tali, have overcome social and cultural barriers to employment.



Hesed welfare centers serve poor Jewish elderly in the FSU

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of a five-story walk-up building. Klara lived alone, as her husband had died 25 years earlier. Her only son died 20 years before. Her pension was all of \$30 a month. She had no living relatives in the world and had not left her one-room apartment to feel the sunshine on her face in years.

I asked her if anyone came to visit and a bright smile broke out on her face. She said JDC-funded *Hesed* volunteers came to visit her regularly and even celebrated her birthday. She could not adequately express her happiness that Jews from North America regularly looked out for her. This woman could have been my mother or grandmother.

This work symbolizes the highest form of charity. Every Jew deserves to live out their life in dignity. Klara reminds me always of the meaning of life. By the way, she is still alive and going strong at 102 years old, thanks to

JDC's *Hesed*: the sole connection for isolated elderly

Meet Raisa. She is 65 years old, disabled, and looks like a typical Soviet Jewish grandmother - stout, on the short side, hair dyed brown, red lipstick and a ready smile. She is a regular participant at the Women's Club at the JDC-supported *Hesed* in Aktyube, Kazakhstan. Raisa is one of many for whom this *Hesed* has become the center of Jewish community life. But Raisa's journey to the *Hesed* was a long one, fraught with tragedy. The daughter of a Polish Jew imprisoned during Stalinist times, her mother died before Raisa turned five years old. Her father put her in an orphanage where she remained for three years before being adopted by a Russian couple who did not raise her as a Jew.

Always knowing she was Jewish, Raisa grew up, married and had two children. After her husband died, Raisa's son Andre moved in and cared for her. He also volunteered at the *Hesed*. At the age of 40, Andre had a heart attack and died. It was then that Raisa, totally alone, turned to the *Hesed*, attending the Women's Club. The people at the *Hesed* are Raisa's only remaining family. This *Hesed* is the only Jewish facility within several hundred miles, serving more than 1,000 Jews including 150 welfare clients. Without it, Raisa would have nowhere to turn.

A network of more than 170 JDC-supported *Hesed* welfare centers and other Jewish organizations offers vital services to ease the burden of the destitute Jewish elderly living in the FSU's 11 time zones.

JDC and its partner, the Jewish people.

Q: What are the most inspiring JDC current projects around the world?



Steven Schwager

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A: All of our hundreds of projects across the globe could fit this description. I personally like to talk about these:

- In the FSU, despite our financial difficulties, we serve more than 160,000 poor elderly Jews living in about 2,900 cities. Even in today's high tech world, it's a logistical miracle!
- In Israel, through our revolutionary PACT programs, we are ensuring that thousands of young Ethiopian-Israelis can overcome educational and cultural barriers that keep them from succeeding in school. PACT is deeply

sensitive to the needs of these young children and their families, and gives them a critical launching-off point into Israeli society.

- The recently opened Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village (ASYV), which will eventually educate and become home to 500 Rwandan orphans, is an amazing project. We are bringing together Americans, Rwandans and Ethiopian-Israelis to help rebuild the lives of these young people, many of whom lost their parents in the Rwandan genocide. Why would we as Jews take up such a task? Our history of persecution and our traditions emphasize Jewish responsibility for bettering the world. ■

For more information about the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, please visit www.JDC.org.