

# THE POWER OF WORKING TOGETHER

This past February, Nachman Shai, who was the co-director of the United Jewish Communities Israel office, was elected to Israel's Knesset. Rebecca Caspi, who was co-director with Shai, assumed his responsibilities. We met with her prior to the organization's annual General Assembly to hear about her first months on the job and her plans for the future / Gaya Polat

**Q: First of all, congratulations on the new name!**

A: Yes, we are now officially known as the Jewish Federations of North America. This change really makes a clear statement that we embody the Jewish Federation system.

**Q: Which issues are currently top priorities for the Jewish Federations?**

A: I think the most critical thing to focus on at the moment is assisting all of the individual Federations during these challenging times, as they seek to provide assistance both domestically and internationally. This means helping Federations identify, recruit and grow the best possible people for key roles in the community, leading innovation in philanthropy using technology - including social media - and helping to promote Federations as centers of Jewish life in towns and cities across America.

We hope that everyone will know that this is where you go to build a meaningful Jewish community. And by coming together as 157 Federations and some 400 independent communities, we can ensure that we significantly leverage the power of collective action, because the most important strength is the power of working together.

**Q: Why do you think the GA has assumed such a prominent position in the North American Jewish calendar?**

A: Here's a really Jewish answer: tradition. Everyone knows that there's one time when we'll come together as a continental community to meet and engage in the most important issues of the day. That means that whether you come from a small community in the Southwest or a major city in the Northeast, or an independent network community, you can contribute and meet with other people who share your passion and commitment to doing the right thing and to doing it well.

The GA is an annual expression of the size and scope of the Federation system, and particularly now, when times are tough, I believe that coming together helps people recharge their batteries, reconnect and recommit, and that's a really exciting concept.

**Q: How do you view the relationship between American Jewry and Israel?**

A: First of all, it's a really exciting and



dynamic relationship. It's hard to speak of it as something that is stable, because the relationship is growing and evolving as the world becomes more flat. It's not just about money, it's about engaging both sides to strengthen each other; it's what each side brings to make a vibrant mix of Jewish life today. I think that the relationship is complex - like in any family: there's a warm environment where real discussions happen. Personally, I'm looking forward with significant curiosity to see what forms this relationship will take, particularly with the younger generation.

**Q: You have referred to the Jewish Federations of North America as a "convener of issues." How is this reflected in practice?**

A: It's a state of mind. Our work is characterized by a desire and drive to find and facilitate the collective desires of our constituents. We provide platforms for the exchange of information, ideas and dialogue through a number of frameworks including professional affinity groups and Federations' city-size groups. We also convene around issues, during times of emergency, or matters of strategic importance such as the Negev. I think that this is yet another area where we provide real, concrete value.

**Q: What is the Negev Task Force?**

A: The Task Force came into existence a couple of years ago, as the collective expression of involvement, passion and commitment to the Negev as a region. It builds on ties forged through the Jewish Agency for Israel's "Partnership 2000" umbrella, which brings together people from North American communities and Israeli communities. Through this framework, they invest in Israel and build strong ties.

A group of Federations working in the Negev through this and other programs is looking to help bring their impact to the next level and reinvigorate and fulfill Ben Gurion's dream. We are helping them think through and determine the best ways to achieve these goals. The Negev Task Force is the framework through which all this happens. It's a great example of the Jewish Federations of North America as a convener of issues that are important to the Federations themselves, and of how we are able to take their help and impact to a whole new level.

**Q: As the head of the Jewish Federations' Global Operations, you had to organize a response to the crisis in Gaza last January, which was very different from the situation in the Second Lebanon War three years ago. How were things different?**

A: I think both Israel and the Jewish Federations have learned from experience and in particular from what took place during the Second Lebanon War. We have built on that collective experience, for example, expanding our system's outreach to Israeli philanthropists and Israeli volunteers to maximize the impact of the Federations' funding during times of crisis.

We can also take significant pride in the fact that our work across the national system occurs in a highly coordinated way that conveys needs in the field quickly and effectively to Federations. This ensures that the incredible efforts to raise funds to address those needs can be transformed effectively into concrete help for Israel where and when it is needed the most.

**Q: So, what role did the Jewish Federations play during Operation Cast Lead this last winter?**



Young Jewish girls  
from the FSU

Jonathan Levine

## The General Assembly: by the people, for the people

Presented annually by The Jewish Federations of North America, The General Assembly (GA) is the premier annual North American Jewish conference, attracting Federation lay leaders and professionals as well as the leadership of our partner organizations and other important national Jewish organizations. It's an event that inspires and engages current and emerging Jewish leaders, tackles the most critical issues of the day, and showcases the best of the Federation movement. The GA plenaries, forums and workshops feature top speakers from the political, business and non-profit realms. This year's GA is being held in Washington DC, from November 8th to 10th, 2009 under the theme of "Remember when you thought anything was possible? It still is." President Barack Obama has accepted an invitation to address the assembly, as have numerous other top-ranking leaders. This year, the Jewish Federations of North America received an enthusiastic response to its call for "user-generated" programming for the 2009 GA. Having chosen seven themes related to the most relevant topics of the day for the Jewish communal world, the Jewish Federations received more than 200 detailed proposals, including more than 30 from Federations of all sizes and from every region. These Federations, partner agencies and other key Jewish organizations have had a major role in shaping the workshops at the core of the event. The result of this process is a program in 2009 created "by the people, for the people," and one that reflects the most pressing concerns and innovative ideas of the Federation movement today.

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"The GA is the one time we come together as a continental community to meet and engage in the most important issues of the day"

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A: We had the opportunity to provide the connective tissue between the North American communities - which, whenever Israel is at war, are compelled to act - and the people of Israel, especially in the western Negev, who were experiencing a severe crisis. The way this was expressed was to work with JAFI, JDC and other partners to map and validate

the needs of the people on the ground. And then to convey those needs to all members of the community and work with them and with the entire Jewish Federations team in order to assist in outreach efforts.

One very visible side of the commitment of our system was a top leadership commission from communities across North America who

spontaneously came to see with their own eyes and be here in Israel in order to show their deep solidarity. And I mean really spontaneously - they were here right after the attacks started. Those people became some of the best ambassadors of what was really going on here, even before they returned to their respective communities. Because they were actually →



The closing plenary of last year's GA in Jerusalem

Robert A. Cumins

← here, experiencing the whole thing, running to shelters alongside local residents and seeing their pain and anguish.

**Q: Aside from that wartime mission, you are also involved in bringing Federations to visit Israel on a regular basis. Are you feeling the pinch of the economic crisis?**

A: One thing that hasn't changed this past year is the continued desire on the part of people in our communities to come to Israel. Part of the challenge is how to help individuals and communities achieve this goal, despite the economic crisis. The Missions team has been highly responsive to that need. They recently launched Mission Possible, which provides a low-cost, high-value opportunity to anyone and everyone who wants to come to Israel

with Federations.

At the same time we're seeing that many of the most significant philanthropists are actually increasing their visits to Israel, and they continue to work with Federations to find exciting ways to bring their kids and grandchildren to Israel so that they too can become part of the support chain of love of Israel that is so important to them.

**Q: So much has changed, both globally and at the Jewish Federations, since the last GA in Jerusalem. How are those changes reflected in your work?**

A: At the last GA, Bush was president, Olmert prime minister, we had a different CEO, the global financial crisis was just starting and no one knew that Operation Cast Lead

Rebecca Caspi: "Many of the most significant philanthropists are actually increasing their visits to Israel. They work with Federations to find exciting ways to bring their kids and grandchildren so that they too can become part of the support chain of love to Israel"

would take place. Some challenges though have stayed the same: certainly the looming threat of a nuclear Iran and, unquestionably, the global economic crisis, which has been the defining event for our Federation system for the last year. As I look back, I think that Jewish Federations have acted in a remarkably responsible and thoughtful manner, always mindful of the great responsibility that we all share. The bottom line is: we're weathering the storm surprisingly well.

**Q: How has the Jewish Federations of North America coped with the economic crisis of the past year? How has the economy affected short and long-term goals?**

A: We've sought to use all of our breadth and scope as a national system to assist Federations help one another by exchanging and promoting ideas so that they can continue to become more effective and efficient during these uncommon times. We've sought to ensure that when they make critical decisions about how, who and when to help, that they'll think about Jews in need everywhere - whether it's in their local community to help people get back on their feet again, needs in Israel, Jews in the Former Soviet Union, where Jewish Federations supported programs often provide the only access to Jewish life, or isolated Jews in eastern Europe who have no other support net.

There's a wonderful sense of optimism emerging from this crisis period which is infusing our vital partnerships with JAFI and JDC. Now more than ever, the importance of that collaboration has come to bear as we all strive to increase our effectiveness in meeting so many competing needs. As we begin to see that next period, that post crisis era, I know that while no one can predict what it will hold, Jewish Federations will continue to change lives - heeding the call to action whenever there is a Jew in need, anywhere in the world. ■

## Connecting through volunteerism

It is well known that volunteerism is growing in popularity all over the world, but few people are aware that volunteer projects based in Israel are maintaining that same pace. In fact, Federations across North America have been steadily boosting their focus on volunteer projects often coordinated with their partner communities in Israel. The latest projects have a fresh new flavor. While in the past volunteer opportunities were highly structured and often initiated by Federation staff, today's Federation members get into the trenches - pioneering programs, strategizing with staff, and working to implement every last detail. The result is something inventive in the world of Israel-Diaspora relations: original grassroots volunteer projects that seem to be multiplying by the day, adding a hands-on element to the vital role of Jewish Federation donors in Israel causes.

Baltimore's five-and-a-half year relationship with its partner community of Ashkelon has evolved as a result of this trend, according to Maia Hoffman, THE ASSOCIATED's Director of Missions and Israel Projects. "It's taken on a life of its own," she explains. "We no longer have to ask people to help out on projects; they come to us and want to know, 'when can we go to Ashkelon and volunteer again?'"

"We have always had living bridge projects but they were a small piece of our budget," explains Amir Shacham, Director of Israel Operations UJC of MetroWest. "What's exciting now," according to Lisa Lisser, co-chair of the MetroWest Partnership 2000 Steering Committee, "is that at the same time we transformed our partnership vision to one that focuses on living bridge projects, we have received specific requests from individuals in our community to facilitate new informal living bridge projects. We believe these informal projects have developed as a result of the sparks we created in the past."

Suzanne Selengut