



## New coalition aims to make social justice a community priority

By Amy Klein  
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*Rabbi Jennie Rosenn of the Nathan Cummings Foundation says there's a power in organizations working together "to make for a robust movement." (Nathan Cummings Foundation)*

NEW YORK (JTA) -- When Nancy Kaufman attended a national conference on Judaism and social justice in Chicago in 2005, she looked around the room and said to herself, “Wow, there are 250 [Jewish] social activists here -- there used to be only 10 of us. There's a field here.”

Kaufman, the executive director of the Greater Boston Jewish Communal Relations Council of Greater Boston, then thought, “What are we going to do to advance the field?”

Four years later, what is being done is the Jewish Social Justice Roundtable, a coalition of 18 Jewish social justice organizations banding together to create a unified movement and make their cause part of the national Jewish agenda.

The coalition, founded in May, is set to hold its third conference Oct. 28-29 in New York.

“Jewish social justice and services is emerging as a field, and individually there are many things the organizations can do, but there's a power in them working together to make for a robust movement,” said Rabbi Jennie Rosenn, director of the Jewish Life and Values Program at the Nathan Cummings Foundation, which founded and funds the social justice roundtable.

Last year the foundation published the study “Visioning Justice and the American Jewish Community,” which looked into the strategies that would “engage Jews, Jewish communities, and Jewish institutions more widely, deeply, and effectively in Jewish social justice.”

“We now see the opportunity for bringing organizations and individuals together -- to create a powerful vision and develop coordinated strategies that will bring the field to the next level of visibility, influence, and impact,” authors Shifra Bronznick and Didi Goldenhar wrote in the 100-plus-page study.

In their conclusion, the authors offered eight key recommendations, including strengthening leadership and talent in the field, connecting the organized Jewish community to social justice and creating a social justice roundtable “as a practical structure for moving individuals and groups out of their insular worlds and into a powerful network for social good” to leverage local, regional and national networks.

The roundtable is chaired by six organization leaders: Kaufman of the Boston JCRC, Simon Greer of the Jewish Funds for Justice, Ruth Messinger of the American Jewish World Service, David Rosenn of Avodah: The Jewish Service Corps and Daniel Sokatch, incoming CEO of The New Israel Fund. It includes organizations that take on issues such as hunger, global poverty, climate change, genocide in Darfur and the lack of education in underserved communities. Groups representing the Conservative and Reform movements are taking part.

“How do we collectively elevate social justice to be a centerpiece of Jewish life in America?” Kaufman asked. “How do we raise the visibility of Jewish social justice work, attract unaffiliated Jews to the movement and move the mainstream Jewish organizations to a more social justice orientation?”

The first goal of the meetings -- led by a professional facilitator rather than a leader of one organization -- is to foster relationships between the organizations (the first and second in command are on hand). Participants in roundtable meetings also focus on shared and overlapping agendas, coordinate campaigns, explore opportunities for working together, review best practices for programming and training leadership, and discuss other mutual goals such as finding resources in these difficult times.

They hope to create a movement in the same way other Jewish sectors have umbrella organizations, such as synagogue denominations, rabbis, Hillels, camps and educators.

The launch of the roundtable comes at a time when the Jewish community is facing increased pressure to engage the next generation in its mission, and in an economy where resources are scarce.

“Look at what's happening in America -- the future of America is up for debate,” said Greer, president and CEO of Jewish Funds for Justice, a national public foundation that helps Americans achieve social and economic security and opportunity. “Questions of will we have quality, affordable education in this country, that children don't get sick and homeless, will we rebuild an economy that the middle class won't be creamed -- these are issues facing the country, and the

Jewish community will play a central role. We have the interest, the capacity and the skill to answer the most pressing questions facing America.”

Rabbi Jonah Pesner, the founding director of Just Congregations, the Reform movement's congregation-based community organizing arm, hopes social justice becomes more of a priority on the Jewish community's agenda.

“The Jewish community prioritizes a lot of things before social justice. A lot of Jewish institutional dollars and resources flow to other areas,” he said, highlighting issues such as assimilation and Jewish continuity.

Pesner argued that social justice also is an important cause for promoting continuity in the Jewish community because “you've got tens of thousands of unaffiliated Jews whose primary understanding of Judaism is that it has a message of justice for the world and not necessarily for Torah or worship.”

Pesner, who represents the Reform movement and its Washington arm, the Religious Action Center, at the roundtable, said that a stepped commitment to social justice should not come at the expense of religious observance and other aspects of Jewish life.

“It's an integral part of the whole -- you can't have Judaism without justice or justice without Judaism,” he said.

Coming up on the third meeting, with the intention of renewing the roundtable for another 18 months, many participants say it is premature to gauge results. But they say the effort has been helpful.

“I'm finding this is an enormously important network to help me support the work I want to do,” Kaufman said.