

Fall 2008 Volume 104 Issue 4: Features

Featured Article

Doing Justice: Simon Greer '90 and the American Dream

By Bronwen Pardes

“May you live in interesting times,” goes the old curse, and it’s easy to feel that it could well apply to the times we’re living in right now. But Simon Greer ’90, president and CEO of Jewish Funds for Justice (JFSJ), sees things differently. “What’s unique about this time is that we have the capacity to address the world’s problems,” he says. “We have the resources to feed, clothe, house, care for, and educate everybody on the planet. And we have the telecommunications and technology to know about everybody.” The problem, he believes, is not a lack of resources but a lack of will. “For me,” he says, “that feels a little daunting. But it also feels like an enormous opportunity.” And if anyone has the will to create positive change in the world, it’s Greer.



Greer was raised on New York City’s Upper West Side by Jewish parents, and went on to found the urban social-change group Jews United for Justice before he took his position at the JFSJ. One might assume that Judaism has always played a central role in Greer’s life. In fact, the opposite is true. “I hardly had any Jewish knowledge or consciousness,” he says, adding, “I wasn’t involved in Jewish life at Vassar at all.” What he did grow up with, though, was the idea that “Jews do justice,” a notion symbolized by the story of Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney, civil-rights workers killed in Mississippi in 1964. Goodman and Schwerner were Jewish. “To lead a life trying to make the world a better place,” Greer knew, “would be a high expression of Jewish values.”

It was with such folk heroes in mind that Greer decided, after graduating from Vassar in 1990, to move to Poland to work for the legendary trade union Solidarity. “It seemed like a lot of change was happening in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union,” he explains, “so if you cared about the world and where it was going, that was a place to apply your energy — kind of like the Gulf Coast since Hurricane Katrina. That’s where there’s something in play that is, I would say, transhistorical.”

If his family was shocked that he’d chosen to move to the very country from which his grandparents had fled years before, they were equally surprised when he next moved to South Carolina to become a community organizer. In the course of his work there, he began to connect with his Judaism. The Ku Klux Klan attempted to bomb one of the black churches he worked with, and he began to wonder what was motivating him to put himself in harm’s way. “When I started to investigate that,” he says, he realized that his motivation “was Jewish.” Then one Sunday, at a black Baptist church, the minister looked at him from the pulpit and said, “Simon, we love your Exodus story” — meaning the Biblical story of the Jewish people. But despite having grown up observing Passover, the holiday commemorating the Israelites’ flight from Egypt and liberation from slavery, Greer had never paid much attention to the details of the narrative. Reading Exodus again, he found a story not just of physical bondage, but also about “all the ways we enslave ourselves mentally and emotionally,” he says. “The Jews had to wander the desert because slavery was still in them, and they weren’t going to get to the Promised Land until there was a new generation who hadn’t internalized that oppression. These are profound teachings for a people.” This was also, he realized, the narrative of a long struggle for liberation that Martin Luther King Jr. was referencing in his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech, the day before he was killed.

Greer was beginning to see how his spiritual life supported his social-change work, and how his work and his religion were an integral and intertwined part of who he is. (He doesn’t want to leave his work behind at the office, he says, when he goes to meditate or study — and he doesn’t want to forget the feeling of reading a sacred text when he heads back to the office.) And after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 — when the times we live in got horribly, horrifyingly more “interesting” — the connection, for Greer, between Judaism and community organizing, between religion and the need to “do justice,” grew even stronger. Greer sensed then that “the same way capitalism and communism defined global politics from after World War II until 1989, the dynamic between political life and religious identity, between fundamentalism and modernism, between Christianity and Islam — these are going to be the defining features of our lifetime. And what does that mean for a Jewish person? There was no way we were going to dodge religion as a key piece of political life. And as a Jewish person in political life, I had to figure out where I stood.”



Senator Barack Obama, between college and law school, worked for three years as a community organizer on Chicago's South Side; the high visibility of his presidential campaign, in the past year and a half, has brought the work of community organizing quite possibly more attention than it has ever received before. (Obama was the recipient of a grant from JFSJ for his community organizing work in Chicago.) But in spite of this new exposure, very few people really understand what community organizing involves. Greer is often asked, half-jokingly, if he organizes closets or desks, yet JFSJ's list of accomplishments during his tenure is far from mundane: raised millions of dollars to help low-income communities redevelop areas in the Gulf Coast affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita; helped launch the first national interfaith fund for long-term domestic disaster recovery; contributed over a million dollars to help a coalition of Baltimore churches rebuild their neighborhood (and sent student volunteers there to help); sent hundreds of Jewish volunteers to do community service in inner cities and across the South; mobilized hundreds of rabbis to support passage of the increase in the federal minimum wage (a list that doesn't even include the work of JFSJ's many individual grant recipients). But Greer's favorite explanation of what the work really means has to do with the logistics of King's "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington in 1963. "There were hundreds of thousands of people there," says Greer. "[Most] didn't own cars, and they didn't stay in really nice hotels. Somebody got hundreds of thousands of people into Washington, DC, and back home again, with very little money, and without incident. Had there been an incident, we might never have heard of the "I Have a Dream" speech. The headline in the papers would have [focused on the riot]." It's the work of a community organizer that "allows people to take action on things beyond their own lives."

An example of this from Greer's own work is the living-wage campaign, which JFSJ supports. About 100 municipalities around the country have passed legislation that makes sure city workers earn enough to live on. "What I love about it," says Greer, "is that it wasn't someone from the outside saying, 'I have a good marketing idea.' It was a real person who wasn't making enough to live on and who didn't want to put a lot of time into volunteering to raise the minimum wage and still live below the poverty line." That, says Greer, is exactly what community organizing is about: "drawing out people's stories and helping them share their wisdom and experience in order to forge solutions to problems that matter to them. And I think that's an American tradition. It's one of our contributions to the world, this idea of people organizing and participating in the civic life of the nation."

It was his mother's story of an impoverished childhood in an orphanage in England — and her death a few years ago — that in part inspired Greer to do this work. "My mom used to say that she went from poverty at age 12 to economic comfort and security at age 59, and that only in America was this possible. And we should be angry that that dream isn't available to everybody else." Greer also grew up with a similar story from his father, who was the son of Polish-immigrant shopkeepers in London's East End. Their stories — arriving in America with very little and knowing almost no one, but eventually being able to take advantage of the American dream — was the story of many Jewish immigrants. But Greer notes that not only do many people still come to the United States this same way, they still need a helping hand. "Will we, as Jews, just take for granted that we have done well here, or will we dedicate ourselves to making sure that everything that was available to my mom — affordable housing, inexpensive higher education, a safety net — is available for the next waves of people coming to America?" The Exodus story, he believes, is not just a story, it's modern reality. "We should continue to tell the story of journeying from bondage and scarcity to liberty and freedom and opportunity, and make sure that story is true for our friends and neighbors and the other people who struggle in America."

We have the resources to do that, Greer says, but lack the motivation to act. And that's where community organizing comes in. "There's a discipline in community organizing that gives people the structure to take action around the things that move them, not just *feel* moved," he says. Organizations like JFSJ, which are engaged in solving problems at a grassroots level — and which give people confidence that their solutions "are not just a band-aid or a finger in the dam, they're serious solutions to structural problems" — inspire people to make change.



Greer's mantra is the Shema, the central prayer of Judaism; he interprets the prayer's opening words ("Listen, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one") to mean that "the infinite and the individual are one" — and if we're all made in the image of the divine, then that's one powerful common denominator. "If I believe that," he says, "and extend that out into the world of organizing and social policy, it means we're all entitled to the same kinds of dignity."

Regardless of what faith one holds, if any, this can be a powerful way to look at the world and to generate the will to see beyond one's own sphere of concern. "Our fates are inextricably linked," says Greer. "If I were asked, 'You lived in a time when you could solve the world's problems if you only had the will — what did you do about that?' I'd like to be able to answer that I worked from a place of my values, in partnership with other people across all sorts of potential divisions, and that together, we won real victories. That is what my calling has been for a long time, and this feels like a great moment to be on that journey."

Photo credit: John Abbott

http://aavc.vassar.edu/vq/articles/doing_justice