

On The Leading Edge Of Social Change

Around the country, and from the Reform to the Orthodox, social justice groups are forcing a new set of values into the mainstream.

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Change agents: Progressive Jewish Alliance's Daniel Sokatch, left, Jewish Funds for Justice's Rabbi Jill Jacobs and Rabbi Jonah Pesner, founding director of the Reform movement's "Just Congregations" initiative.

If you're looking for signs of change in the world of Jewish activism, look no further than San Francisco, where the local Jewish federation has reached into the outsider realm of independent Jewish social justice groups for a new leader.

Next month, Daniel Sokatch, the founding executive director of the [Progressive Jewish Alliance](#) (PJA) in California, will take over as head of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties — a change that could shake up the Jewish communal establishment nationally, especially if the new leader fulfills his initial goals for the organization.

"All we ever wanted to do at PJA is mainstream the values of social justice and community involvement," Sokatch said last week. "We believe this is essential Jewish work because it reflects core Jewish values. But it is also good for our community because it provides one answer to the question of how we stop the drift of disaffiliation."

Social justice groups like PJA, he said, are "seeing enormous numbers of young people connecting. What I hope to do now is bring these values right where they belong: into the heart of our community."

Sokatch's appointment points to an underground change in the world of Jewish activism. Outside-the-box social justice groups like PJA are responding to a communal establishment that has narrowed its vision to the twin issues of Israel and anti-Semitism by developing innovative programs dealing with a range of issues, from fair housing to

sweat shops to support for Hispanic immigrants.

National Jewish organizations are starting to take notice. When UJA-Federation of New York wanted to participate in relief efforts after hurricane Katrina, it turned to the [Jewish Funds for Justice](#) (JFSJ) — which has become a facilitator and incubator for the new activism — for help.

The [Jewish Council for Public Affairs](#) (JCPA) has embarked on a major anti-poverty campaign; the Reform movement has created a “Just Congregations” initiative to encourage synagogue-based community organizing. This month the Conservative movement passed a pioneering religious ruling saying that the issue of economic justice is a moral priority for the community. The movement’s Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, prodded by JFSJ activists like Rabbi Jill Jacobs, passed a “teshuva” calling on Jews to hire unionized workers and pay a “living wage.”

And the social justice focus is beginning to create a stir in the Orthodox community, where young activists are rallying behind programs that seek to “integrate the study of Jewish texts with leadership training and with serious activism to create social change,” said Shmuly Yanklowitz, the 26-year-old rabbinical student and founder of [Uri L’Tzedek](#) (“Awaken to Justice”).

The goal of his group, he said, isn’t simply to encourage “simple volunteer projects” but to promote “projects that create sustainable change, that help us use our power as Orthodox Jews, to create social change, rather than just donating, or doing a mitzvah day.”

Uri L’Tzedek is aimed at “a group that doesn’t get talked about much: more or less unaffiliated, disengaged Modern Orthodox Jews who went through the system, who went to yeshiva in Israel, but now find themselves in a community only concerned with dating, and they find it extremely unmeaningful,” Yanklowitz said. “What we are trying to do is speak to a Judaism that isn’t just about survival and communal concerns, but about re-engaging in the community.”

The group is currently circulating a petition demanding that Agriprocessors, the controversial kosher meat producer in Iowa, pay its workers “at least” the federal minimum wage, observe worker safety laws, allow collective bargaining and “treat those who work for you according to the standards that Torah and halacha places on protecting workers — standards which include the spirit of lifnim meshurat hadin, going beyond the bare minimum requirements of the law.”

In the Reform movement, the [Just Congregations](#) initiative is taking the social justice programs that have long been a part of many synagogues and making them more a part of the Reform infrastructure.

“We are tapping into a demand that was there all along, but we didn’t know to leverage it,” said Rabbi Jonah Pesner, founding director of the initiative. “People were frustrated that for 30 years we’ve been housing people in shelters, we’ve been feeding people in soup kitchens, but at the same time we’ve been watching more and more slip into poverty, more and more affected by a catastrophic health care system. People want to engage in these issues in a way that’s not just charitable.”

Like other groups involved in the new Jewish social justice push, participants in Just Congregations focus heavily on building coalitions with local groups, including other faith communities.

Just Congregations has burgeoned from a handful of projects in the Boston area, where several congregations played a major role in the passage of Massachusetts’ pioneering health care law, to programs in Los Angeles, Chicago, Columbus, Seattle, Dallas and New York. Last month, the Hebrew Union College ordained a rabbi whose first job will be a community organizer in the Baltimore-Washington metropolitan area.

Synagogue-based organizing represents one major frontier in the new Jewish activism, said Mik Moore, the JFSJ public policy director, and it’s growing by leaps and bounds. A JFSJ-sponsored gathering of congregation-based activists in 2005 drew about 140 participants; two years later, more than 300 attended a similar meeting. A health care initiative in San Francisco is being promoted actively by synagogues there.

That trend, he said, is growing “at a very interesting political moment in the country; with Barack Obama the presumptive Democratic nominee, people are looking at community organizing in a different way because of the way he has organized his campaign.”

Moore noted that JFSJ helped fund Obama’s anti-poverty community organizing work on the South Side of Chicago, the launch pad for his later political career.

JFSJ is working to deepen the process by working not just with synagogues but with students at seminaries — inculcating a new generation of Jewish religious leaders in the need for the synagogue to be an instrument of social change.

A second thrust of the new social justice movement is “responsible investing,” Moore said. Through programs like a new JFSJ-Calvert Foundation [Community Investment Initiative](#), individual investors can purchase investment notes to help provide “affordable capital to low-income communities across the United States,” according to a recent announcement by the group.

In the wake of Barack Obama’s revolutionary use of the Internet for fundraising and political organizing, JFSJ is also “exploring how we can tap into the interest and excitement in online activism,” Moore said.

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The group's [JSPOT](#) Web site, he said, will eventually “become a hub of online Jewish activism. People will know: if you want to become engaged, you can come here, find out what other people are doing and get connected.”

While JFSJ is playing a role in promoting and coordinating the social justice surge, the movement is also being driven by local community groups that have been working quietly for years to keep alive the Jewish commitment to on-the-ground, coalition-based work.

A pioneer was the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, created in 1964 in the heat of the civil rights movement; today, its big issues include immigrant rights, day labor and affordable housing.

Other groups include the Jewish Social Policy Action Network (JSPAN) in Philadelphia, the Jewish Alliance for Law and Social Action (JALSA) in Boston and Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ) in New York.

Increasingly, those groups are being recognized by major national Jewish organizations both for the community work they do — and for their impact in drawing younger, less affiliated Jews into specifically Jewish engagement.

The biggest and most active of those groups is the Progressive Jewish Alliance (PJA) in California, created in 1999. While the group sometimes riled the local Jewish establishment — a few years ago it mounted a major global campaign against sweatshop labor, which does not go over well with some Jewish textile company executives — it also demonstrated a willingness and ability to work with major Jewish groups.

That growing connection was dramatically illustrated when the San Francisco Jewish Federation chose Sokatch, the PJA's founding director, as its new executive. Sokatch said the surge in social justice activism represents a return to a traditional focus in Jewish life that has been diffused in the wake of the Holocaust and the creation of Israel.

“We are profoundly aware in our Jewish social justice movement that we are not inventing something new, but holding up core values and truths that for millennia Jews have been devoted to,” he said. “We’re just the latest links in the chain of people who have said that working to build better communities for everybody is at the core of who we are as Jews. We are responding to communal institutions that have moved away from those core values.”

That renewed focus, he said, is one answer “to the vexing question of how we can stop the drift of disaffiliation.”