

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

At world JCC conference, officials seek solutions to common problems

[By Dina Kraft](#)

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HAIFA, Israel, Sept. 21 (JTA) — In Bombay, Leora Ezekiel works to bring the Jewish community together from across the crowded, sprawling city. In Buenos Aires, Rabbi Fabian Skornik helps distribute food and medicine to Jewish families struggling in the aftermath of Argentina's economic crash.

The two Jewish community center directors were among 250 participants from 35 countries attending the three-day World Conference of Jewish Community Centers, which began Monday in Haifa. Participants came from as far away as Peru, Kyrgyzstan and Portugal. The conference usually is held every four years.

The local challenges JCCs face may differ depending on the country and the continent, but the overall challenge of keeping Jews Jewish is common to them all as they grapple with how to make Jewish life an intriguing and viable option, especially to the younger generation.

The JCC directors and leaders are happy to have a chance to come together.

"For us it is a great opportunity to hear what other communities are trying and were successful in offering, and to give examples of our work," said Abraham Lehrer, president of the Federation Jewish Welfare Organization of Germany.

Lehrer is from Cologne, where the Jewish population has surged from 1,200 to 5,000 in the past 15 years, since Germany began absorbing large numbers of Jews from the Former Soviet Union.

Many of the Jews from the former Soviet Union arrive with little knowledge or background in Jewish life after decades living under Communist rule, making outreach to them a special challenge.

Lehrer, a lay leader who runs a software company, has been trading ideas with directors of community centers in the former Soviet Union who face similar issues.

There are over 1,000 JCCs across the world, if one includes centers in Israel. The former Soviet Union, with 180 centers, now ranks third behind Israel and the United States.

One of the projects highlighted at the conference was a mentoring program where highly effective JCC directors from Israel, the United States and England are sent to the former Soviet union to train counterparts there. The plan is to expand the project to other parts of the world.

The theme of partnerships and helping one another was reinforced at the conference.

“It lets people know that we’re only part of the global Jewish village. It’s important for people around the world to know that we all have something in common and we are all responsible for one in another in a Jewish world,” said Jerry Spitzer, president of the worldwide JCC group.

Five new JCCs recently opened — in Poland, Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria and Moldova.

Wearing a scarlet-colored sari, Ezekiel of Bombay and several colleagues from Bulgaria, the United States, and elsewhere toured the Reform movement’s Leo Baeck Education Center on Tuesday. The center is a combination of a community center, high school, synagogue and education center.

Through its social action programs, the center works with thousands of Haifa families, including Arabs, immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia — many of them from poor neighborhoods where there are few social services.

As she walked through the center, with its glistening swimming pool and views of Haifa, Ezekiel spoke of the challenges of working in Bombay, where 4,000 Jews live in the city and its suburbs.

Because the city is so large, she said, the community is “too fragmented. We need to bring everyone together under one roof.”

Intermarriage and anti-Semitism are not major issues in India, but keeping the community active and interested is. The Bombay JCC offers Sunday school, day camps and youth groups.

Across the globe in Buenos Aires, Skornik, a Conservative rabbi, tries to bring more young Jews into the JCC he runs, which is both a synagogue and a community center offering sports facilities, informal education courses and activities for the elderly. Some 400 families belong to the center, named Lamroth Hakol.

Much of their focus is reaching out to families trying to get by financially after Argentina’s economic crash of 2001-2002. In addition, the 160,000 Jews in Buenos Aires still are coming to terms with the bombings of the Israeli embassy in 1992 and the main JCC in 1994.

The advantage of JCCs is that they’re seen as welcoming, open places that can forge community in an easy, natural way, advocates say.

“JCCs are an opening gate for many Jews,” said Smadar Bar Akiva, executive director of the World Confederation of Jewish Community Centers. “It’s where they feel comfortable just walking in.”

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