Thinking Globally, Acting Locally

Michael Feinstein, CEO

Last month I had the opportunity to participate in JCC Global’s 9th World Conference of JCCs in Jerusalem. JCC Global connects over a thousand JCCs worldwide. Nothing has made me feel as much a part of a Jewish people as attending this conference which attracted 500 lay and professional leaders from 24 countries. In addition to representatives from the countries I would have expected, there were also representatives from the Jewish communities of China, Greece, India, Moldova, Philippines and Turkey. There are many Jewish communities around the world that are very small, yet the JCCs are working hard to create vibrant communities. While there was great diversity in language, backgrounds and concerns in different communities, I experienced an incredible feeling of oneness in the larger group and in my individual conversations with colleagues from Bordeaux, Athens, Krakow, Caracas, Jerusalem and other cities around the world. I’m sure many of you, like me, have played “Jewish geography” when meeting someone for the first time, or felt a connection to another Jewish person even though you didn’t know them. That sense of being part of an extended family really came through at this conference.

The first few days of the conference were devoted to a smaller group of 25 JCCs from around the world who are participating in JCC Global’s Amitim-Fellows program. This group has created seven global JCC projects that cover a broad range of programs such as developing best practices in the area of special needs, arts programs and identify building programs.

Our Center is partnering with the two JCCs in New York City (Manhattan and Bensonhurst), the JCC in Budapest and the community centers in Be’er Sheva on a teen program that seeks to develop inspired and engaged young leaders through an immersive exchange program. The 19 teens participating in this Hamsa Teen Fellowship program are spending time together in each country to learn about both the culture and challenges in each community. They are learning what they have in common and where they have differences. They are developing a sense of what it means to be Jewish and part of a global people, learning how to work across cultures and learning leadership skills. Ultimately the teens will bring their learning and new global perspectives back to their communities, youth groups and JCCs.

One of our teen participants, Melanie Ezrin, described the impact of the first part of the program as follows: The trip to Budapest and Szarvas [teen leadership camp in Hungary] was absolutely amazing, and I had the most unbelievable experience. I couldn’t even begin to describe the feeling of cheering for other countries and them cheering for you, and dancing the hora around the dining hall with people you don’t know and who might not speak English, yet still having this incredible connection to them... It’s been a life changing experience.

Creating personal connections is fundamental to our mission. While we are a JCC in Montgomery County, Maryland, we live in a global world. When we have personal connections we are more likely to take action when we see a need. Jews across the globe have a shared history, religion and set of values that inform our shared purpose as a people. Part of that purpose is to help Jews in need wherever they are: “All Jews are all responsible for each other (Kol Yisrael arevim zeh b’zeh).” That is part of the understanding we are creating for the teens involved in the Hamsa program.

Our purpose is also more universal - to help create a more just and righteous world through social activism by repairing the world (tikkun olam) and performing acts of kindness (hesed). The teens will gain an understanding of these values through their leadership training and our Center’s teen participants will then help organize hands-on social action opportunities in our community.

By thinking globally and acting locally we can create deeper connections to Jewish communities around the world and our broader community here at home. We anticipate that the Hamsa program will help develop future Jewish leaders who understand that this duality can enrich our lives, strengthen our people, and bring greater understanding and meaning to being Jewish in the 21st century.