

## Just Congregations: A Year in Review

Dear Friends,

In just a few short hours, the shofar will once again intone its call: return again. Echoing through the halls of our synagogues and onto the streets of our communities, its timeless blast connects us to the past and our future all at once. It connects us to the Jews of ancient Israel, to our immigrant grandparents, and to our children's children. It calls us to return, reflect, and renew; it calls us to wake up. We are charged not only to search our own souls, but to judge our communities: are we congregations of righteousness and mercy?

This year of all years, with the economic collapse, rampant joblessness, a plague of foreclosures, and suffering in our pews and in our neighborhoods, we are called to act. The staff and leaders of Just Congregations will continue to foster sacred communities that reach across lines of race, class and faith to build the power for redemption. Thank you for your leadership and support of Just Congregations.

As we reach the conclusion of the 5769 we wanted to share some reflections with you on our accomplishments. In the last three years since the launch of Just Congregations, congregation-based community organizing has spread rapidly within the Reform Movement. All over the country Reform Jews are working across lines of faith, race, and class to improve life in America. In the process, our member congregations are deepening their sacred communities of prayer, study, and justice.

As a result of Just Congregations efforts, the number of Reform congregations belonging to broad-based community organizing groups has doubled, growing to more than 75 synagogues. Scores more are engaged in the process of joining local groups. Reform congregations were part of founding assemblies of new community organizing groups in Washington State and Virginia, and our synagogues are at the center of emerging projects in New York and New Jersey. Just Congregations continues to work with congregations of all sizes in our target metropolitan areas-Chicago, Boston, New York, Los Angeles and Dallas. Many flagship Reform synagogues are "Just Congregations," including Central Synagogue in New York City, Congregation Beth-Am in Los Altos Hills, Stephen S. Wise Temple and Wilshire Boulevard Temple in Los Angeles, Temple Emanu-El of Dallas, Temple Israel of Boston, and Temple Sholom in Chicago.

Just Congregations has become the premier organization bringing American Jews into the vibrant organizing that already engages and animates Protestants, Catholics, and Muslims, African-Americans, Latinos, and many others to deepen relationships and to find solutions to our common problems. Just Congregations is pleased that our efforts are responsible for so many significant moments of fellowship and common cause:

In Los Angeles, congregants at five Reform synagogues connected to Latino and African-American churches about common fears of losing homes. Working through their local community organizing group, One LA, they championed a strategy to reduce the number of

homeowners facing foreclosure and the potential deterioration of neighborhoods. Their initiative led the Los Angeles City Council to vote unanimously to fund a \$1.5 million pilot foreclosure prevention project with an aim to replicate it in multiple neighborhoods.

Troubled by overcrowded public schools in New York City, Central Synagogue used its new organizing skills in a matter of months to enter into relationship with the New York City Department of Education and play an invaluable role in determining how and where to open a new, much-needed local school in the coming year.

Jewish doctors and low-income immigrant patients in Dallas joined to expand medical care. Their efforts through Dallas Area Interfaith were instrumental in the passage of a \$747 million bond to create 800 new beds at a high-quality but overcrowded public hospital which serves as a safety net for low-income Dallas residents. The hospital is the largest in Dallas County, and so busy that they have nine maternity wards; a study found that the hospital was more than 50% undersized for its volume of patients. Temple Emanu-El has gone on to play a central role in expanding local health care, including engaging the Federation in plans for a mobile low-cost health clinic hosted by congregations throughout the county.

In Chicago, members of Congregation B'nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim in Glenview, IL and the Third Baptist Church, an African-American church on the South Side of Chicago, joined with other member congregations of United Power for Action and Justice to successfully pass legislation allowing parents to use their own health insurance to cover young adults (ages 19-26). These congregations were united by shared concern for their own children: young adults in college, out of work, or struggling to find jobs with good benefits who consequently lacked health coverage. Inspired by the relationships that emerged from their work together, BJB and Third Baptist Church have begun to learn more about each through joint worship, study, conversation - and even sharing bagels and lox!

In New York's Westchester County eight Reform synagogues are jointly exploring the creation of a new broad-based community organizing group that will build the power necessary to create social change-the first time that Jewish congregations could be the catalyst for an organizing group.

We are proud that, city by city and case by case, such relationships and shared concerns have led to tangible, high-profile victories saving homes from foreclosure, expanded hospital facilities, increased health care coverage, created new public schools, and more.

In the past year, Just Congregations began to expand from our focus on local victories to explore a new strategy around supporting two major national campaigns. The PICO National Network recently took a successful local fight to expand children's health care to a national level in partnership with many faith communities. PICO played a central role along with the Reform Movement's own Religious Action Center in the current health care debate, emphasizing the need to insure all citizens. Thanks to Rabbi David Saperstein, as part of Just Congregations support for this effort, Rabbi Jonah Pesner appeared on CNN as a key religious figure in the health care debate. In addition, seventeen affiliates from the

Industrial Areas Foundation in the Midwest and East Coast came together this year to address the crushing effect of debt in America in the form of credit cards, pay day lending, and other usurious practices. The campaign has engaged state attorneys general, members of Congress, and figures in the Obama administration, and aims to have a national impact on the regulation of debt, particularly protecting the poor. The potential for the Reform Movement to engage in these and other national campaigns is exciting.

Within the Reform Movement, Just Congregations continues to build the current and next generations of social justice rabbis. One of the elements that most determines a congregation's success in community organizing is the presence of a clergy member who is committed to and trained in the skills of congregation-based community organizing and is able to anchor the congregation's organizing efforts. Increasing the number of clergy engaged in synagogue organizing and helping them to develop their organizing skills is one of Just Congregations' core strategies. In the past few years, approximately one hundred students have been trained in the skills of congregation-based community organizing on all three domestic campuses of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion through our work with Jeannie Appleman, Director of Seminary Leadership Programs of the Jewish Funds for Justice. Thanks to support from the Hilda and Jacob Blaustein Foundation, this year, for the first time, Just Congregations was able to offer the most promising students congregational organizing internships in synagogues in New York, New Jersey, Ohio, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, allowing them to gain both practical and theoretical experience.

In addition to our investment in future clergy, Just Congregations spent the past year developing a corps of rabbis through ongoing mentoring by Jonah Pesner and Lila Foldes; by hosting a *mifgash* (encounter) between nineteen American rabbis who organize and Israeli rabbis interested in learning about organizing at the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) convention in Jerusalem in February 2008; and by building on that *mifgash* through our first ever day-long rabbinic gathering held in Chicago in June 2009, attended by 28 rabbis from our target cities and several rabbinic students who are congregational organizing interns. The June 2009 Chicago gathering was a unique opportunity for rabbis to share best practices, ask challenging questions, and engage in Jewish learning, inspired by the teaching of Rabbis Richard Levy and David Saperstein. At the gathering, the group committed to continue working together: meeting once or twice a year; holding periodic conference calls and webinars to learn from each other's local successes; holding small local or regional gatherings; writing articles for an upcoming issue of the CCAR journal; and over time, exploring coordinated action and campaigns with the Religious Action Center and community organizing networks.

The greatest resource of the Reform Jewish Movement is our people: the rabbis and cantors of the present and future, and the members of Reform synagogues with whom we are privileged to work. Through our work with them we are inspired by the opportunities laid out before Reform Jewry today—the opportunity to build relationships across lines of faith, race, and economic background; the opportunity to act on our values; the opportunity to make positive change for all Americans. We commit to continue to delve deeply, to build capacity, and to make congregation-based community organizing the norm in American Jewish life.

Just Congregations believes that now more than ever we need Jews to be in relationship with other religious, racial, and ethnic groups to solve the most pressing problems facing our nation and to strengthen Jewish life in America.

As the call of the shofar echoes in our hearts and thoughts we wish you a year of sweetness, joy, and the blessing of justice.

L'shalom,  
Rabbi Jonah Pesner, Founding Director