



Walking in Heschel's Footsteps

The Jewish Organizing Initiative
2009 Year End Report

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Recently I had the unexpected joy of listening to a radio program honoring Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. A Jewish mystic and a passionate social activist, Heschel saw the call to compassion and justice as the very core of Biblical tradition. Invoking the “deep love, painful rebuke and unwavering hope” of the Hebrew prophets, Heschel insisted that “the opposite of good is not evil, it is indifference.” After marching for civil rights alongside the Reverend Martin Luther King in Selma, Alabama, he said, “It felt like my legs were praying.”

Here at the Jewish Organizing Initiative, we are both humbled and proud to walk in Rabbi Heschel’s footsteps. Like him, we are compelled by the Jewish mandate for tikkun olam, repair of the world, to address the injustice and suffering in our communities. Like him, we combine a love for Jewish tradition with thoughtful action, as we train the next generation of Jewish social justice leaders. Carrying on Rabbi Heschel’s legacy and that of the Hebrew prophets he revered, we tap the spirit of a generation of young Jews who are as hungry to define their values and identity as they are to have an impact on the world around them. The insight, skills and experience they gain help them become dynamic and effective organizers for social change, whose dedication, leadership and passion inspire others and make their mark both within and outside of the Jewish community.

The Impact of JOI Fellows

Today, as much as any time in recent history, our society is in need of Jewish organizers’ passion for repair. Communities are reeling from the impact of the biggest economic crisis since the great Depression. Our health care system is about to undergo unprecedented change. Struggles for equality continue as steps forward meet with backlash. Climate change is rapidly transforming the environment that nurtures us.

JOI digs deep into Jewish values and tradition to bring hope to this challenging landscape. Working hands-on in local organizations, both Jewish and secular, our Fellows and alumni build the vibrant grassroots efforts at the heart of lasting social change. This year, their work has led to results like these:

- safeguarding funding for afterschool and summer jobs for inner city youth
- ensuring that the Education Reform Act of 2009 addresses the real needs of children from all backgrounds
- persuading the Democratic US Senate candidates to agree to bring \$100 Million in Job training funds back to Massachusetts if they’re elected
- bringing locally-grown food to Jewish congregations in Massachusetts through Community Supported Agriculture
- training synagogues across the country to become more welcoming to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Jews

There isn't room to tell the stories of all of our JOI Fellows' successes. But these will give you a taste of how they use what they learn to help communities act successfully for change:

Uniting low-income residents to fight for the right to housing.

Rachel English, a JOI Fellow in 2008-2009, continues to make a powerful difference in her position as an organizer with the Chelsea Collaborative, a community development agency serving one of Massachusetts' poorest and most diverse cities. Rachel recognized a need to give the city's private and public housing tenants more of a voice in the policies that have an impact on their daily lives, and get people from the city's many ethnic groups talking and working together. Starting completely from scratch, she organized Chelsea's first Citywide Tenants Association, a grassroots organization that has grown to a membership of 200 strong, representing seven different nationalities. Monthly meetings attract a diverse group of 20-25 people, who are building strong cross-ethnic ties as they develop leadership and strategize on common issues. The union helps tenants gain access to legal services and other critical resources, and has drawn media attention to the impact of the foreclosure crisis in minority communities. Thanks in large part to its efforts, the Chelsea City Council recently passed an anti-foreclosure resolution. Similarly, advocacy is planned on the statewide level.

Bringing a dynamic Jewish voice to faith-based organizing.

JOI Fellows and Alumni have become a vibrant force in faith-based social justice organizing in the greater Boston area. They offer fresh energy and an impressive array of skills to long-standing organizations like the Jewish Community Relations Council; help build innovative new efforts, like the Moishe /Kavod Jewish Social Justice House, from the ground up; and bring a passionate Jewish activist perspective to interfaith efforts like the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization. This year, JOI alumnus Julie Aronowitz worked with the JCRC and GBIO to bring young adults together in house parties to discuss the impact of the economic crisis on their daily lives. This led to a dialogue with Senatorial candidates about the burden of student loans, resulting in their commitment to sponsor legislation including student loans in bankruptcy proceedings. In Newton, another 2008-2009 Fellow, Lauren Jacobson, worked with GBIO and the Reform movement's Just Congregations program to organize synagogue members opposed to funding cuts in transportation for the elderly. Their advocacy led to a City Council ordinance supporting restored funding, and a commitment by mayoral candidates to make the issue a priority.

Building Leaders, Nurturing Jewish Commitment

Such young people, however talented, do not become successful organizers by accident. JOI's intensive year-long program trains and nurtures them, teaching hands-on organizing skills and fostering reflection on their experience through the lens of Jewish values and traditions.

The impact is profound. Today, with more than a hundred alumni around the world, JOI has formally partnered with more than 60 nonprofits in greater Boston that look to us to recruit and train talented young staff organizers whose work is critical to their

ability to make a difference in their communities. As they play key roles in the social change work of their organizations, our fellows become more highly skilled, committed and effective organizers who are better equipped to work for social change over the long haul. According to our most recent fellow final evaluation and alumni survey:

- 100% of fellows learned and implemented key organizing, leadership, and community building skills over the course of their JOI year.
- 91% of fellows found that JOI significantly increased their social change and organizing skills and knowledge.
- Over 80% of our graduates have stayed in social justice and non-profit fields, or are in graduate programs to prepare them for a career related to social justice.
- Fifty percent of our fellows go on to be hired as staff by their placement organizations.

While they grow as social change leaders, our Fellows deepen their ties to their Jewish identity. As they reflect on social change through a Jewish lens and in Jewish community, they find new relevance and meaning in their culture and tradition. They come to integrate Jewish commitment and their passion for social justice in ways they had previously not thought possible, many report being profoundly challenged and changed:

JOI has changed the way that I look at the world and given me a radical new set of skills with which to address injustice. Never before have I been in a community that challenges me as persistently and effectively as this.

One of the most fascinating aspects of my experience at JOI is that we DO make a difference. Every Friday before Shabbat we sit together, learn from each other, exchange information and create a support group that causes a great impact in the grassroots work that we do. You feel Tikkun Olam is not an abstract concept but rather is a reality and its pursuit becomes a lifestyle.

I cannot thank JOI enough for the positive experience I have had from my fellowship year and the ever-lasting sense of community they create. JOI helped me share my story with others, and reflect personally on what type of leader I want to be. I now know that I want to spend the rest of my life working in the Jewish community. JOI takes leaders and gives them the tools to empower those around them to work towards a better world.

I came to examine my own Jewish beliefs and values and finally found a way “back in” to the Judaism I’d been growing apart from since becoming bat mitzvah. While I’d previously frequented synagogues and Jewish events in the community, no other Jewish program connected my core values and beliefs with Jewish education and skills-building in a concrete, experiential, identity-shifting way... An investment in JOI is an investment not just in the lives of the individual fellows, but in the communities and lives of all that those fellows will shape throughout their lifetimes, and all that the impacted leaders they’ve developed will go on to change.

A Strong Year, an Exciting Future.

Despite today's challenging climate for nonprofits, JOI has gone from strength to strength. The number of applications we receive is steadily climbing — our 120 applicants for 2010 represent a 63% increase from last year and a tripling from two years ago. In the past year, we were honored to be invited to be part of the Nathan Cummings Foundation's Jewish Social Justice Roundtable, a gathering of leaders who are building the Jewish social justice movement nationally. A growing number of national foundations are investing in our work with new and renewed funding. We were chosen by Repair the World, a new foundation dedicated to promoting Jewish service learning, as one of 12 recipients of its first round of grants to organizations.

None of our successes would have happened without your generous support. Now we are asking you to open your hands and hearts again, so we can grow, deepen our impact and expand our reach over the coming year. With your help, JOI will strengthen our Fellows as thoughtful and ethical leaders through our innovative Mussar program, which employs a traditional system of Jewish study and reflection to explore how individuals are impacted by issues of power and oppression. We will embark on an exciting new initiative to forge connections with organizations that empower women and girls. We will assume our new role as the Jewish partner in an Interfaith Organizing Apprenticeship Program, aimed at engaging more young people in faith-based activism for social change. We will help to train a new generation of Jews in community organizing through Project Impact, an exciting new summer program of service learning sponsored by B'nai Brith Youth Organization and Brandeis University.

Please Give Generously

When Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel prayed with his feet in Selma, Alabama, he was engaging in a profound expression of Jewish values and tradition. At JOI, we live by a similar call to tikkun olam — but we know, like him, that none of us can change our society alone. Your commitment, your help, your tzedakah are essential to our mission. Please join us in carrying on Rabbi Heschel's legacy, as we help new generations of leaders to meld Jewish learning and Jewish action. Please give generously to JOI, and together we'll continue to repair and transform our world.