



live generously®

## With the state budget, 'observe what is right and do what is just'

By Joyce Altman and Elana Kahn-Oren

### Chair

Joyce Altman

### Director

Elana Kahn-Oren

### Organization Members

American Association of Jews from  
the Former Soviet Union  
American Jewish Committee  
Americans for Peace Now  
Beth El Ner Tamid Synagogue  
B'nai B'rith International  
Congregation Anshai Lebowitz  
Congregation Anshe Sfard/Kehilat Torah  
Congregation Beth Israel  
Congregation Beth Jehudah  
Congregation Emanu-El B'ne Jeshurun  
Congregation Emanu-El of Waukesha  
Congregation Shalom  
Congregation Shir Hadash  
Congregation Sinai  
The Generation After  
Hadassah  
Harry & Rose Samson Family  
Jewish Community Center  
Hillel Milwaukee  
Jewish Family Services  
Jewish War Veterans  
Lake Park Synagogue  
NA'AMAT USA  
National Council of Jewish Women  
New American Club  
ORT America  
Temple Menorah  
Wisconsin Council of Rabbis  
Wisconsin Society for Jewish Learning

Safeguarding rights and pursuing  
social justice since 1938

### Milwaukee Jewish Federation

#### President

Jerry Benjamin

#### Executive Vice President

Richard H. Meyer

One hundred years ago this month, on Saturday, March 25, 1911, 146 garment workers at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory died because of a fire in the company's high rise factory building in New York City.

As the flames curled outside the windows, the young workers — most of them recent Jewish immigrants aged 16-23 — realized they were trapped. The fire escapes had broken away from the building, and the bosses had locked the doors to the building. Fifty-four women jumped or fell to their deaths. Almost 100 more burned to death.

It took that tragedy to spur the creation and enforcement of laws to protect workers and ensure workplace safety and fair working conditions.

The story of that fire is an essential piece of the American Jewish experience. It was our parents and grandparents — including members of our own families — who formed the masses of working people who bowed over sewing machines in New York's sweatshops. They organized and demanded change, and we, 100 years later, still benefit from their bravery.

As we consider the newly approved law that eliminated collective bargaining rights for most public employees in Wisconsin, and the proposed biennial budget, we cannot ignore the critical needs that led to the formation of America's labor unions.

Keeping in mind the deep and undeniable connection between American Jews and the labor movement, we are also keenly aware that workers' conditions and safety standards are dramatically and thankfully better. Unions have changed over the years, and their reform has periodically been necessary.

There are serious and pressing needs that led us to this moment — the extreme budget deficit and the complexity of today's relationship between unions, employers and workers, particularly in the case of public employee unions.

### Chorus of voices

The Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) of the Milwaukee Jewish Federation does not have an official position regarding labor unions, but the current controversy compels us to begin the serious process of building consensus on the issue, a process that will include listening openly to opinions on all sides.

As we consider the hottest issues of the day — from labor unions to the range of cuts in the proposed biennial budget — we will certainly look at them through the multiple lenses of Jewish values and Jewish texts. Transcending the partisan nature of budget-related conflicts, we choose instead to think about people — rich and poor, powerful and powerless — and how these proposed changes will affect them.

To be clear: There is no single Jewish voice, nor is there one Jewish position. Unlike other faith groups, we are not represented by one religious leader. Moreover, Jews of equal learning can look at the same texts and draw different conclusions regarding contemporary conflicts.

That chorus of voices strengthens our community conversation by spurring us to measure issues and decisions against the rich sources of Jewish wisdom.

What does Jewish wisdom tell us about the current battles raging around the state budget? A few of the relevant Jewish values include:

- **Treat workers with dignity and respect.** Workers' rights are certainly a Jewish value. There are multiple sources in the Torah and Talmud addressing the dignity of labor and laborers, the right to prompt payment, the right to cease labor and other aspects of work.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, first chief rabbi of the British Mandate for Palestine said about unions:

“Within the workers’ organization, which is formed for the purpose of guarding and protecting the work conditions, there is an aspect of righteousness and uprightness and *tikkun olam* [repair of the world].... For the unorganized worker works under worse conditions, both in regard to wages and in regard to working hours, etc. And this is likely to make working conditions worse in general.”

- **Live within our means and exercise fiscal responsibility.** A ballooning budget deficit is an unsustainable reality that demands real and difficult action. According to “Sefer Hasidim,” a book about the teachings of three leaders of German Hasidism during the 12th and 13th centuries: “Pay your debts before you dispense alms” (13C, #1247, p. 308).

- **Care for those in need, repair the world (*tikkun olam*), and pursue justice.** Our texts are unequivocal on this: “If your brother becomes poor ... uphold him” (Leviticus 25:35) and “Draw out your soul to the hungry” (Isaiah 58:10).

- **Take personal responsibility.** Do not passively receive aid but actively work to help yourself as you engage the help of others. “Who has for two meals may accept nothing from a charity kitchen; and for 14 meals, nothing from a public fund” (Misnha: Peah, 8.7).

- **Treasure education.** Judaism values education for its own sake and also as a path to achieve and contribute to society. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, “Above all, we pride ourselves on the education of our children.”

As a community based on faith, we are particularly dismayed by the tenor of these political battles. Rather than focus on solving common problems, our political representatives have escalated the conflict, played partisan games and increased polarization.

Healthy communities grow out of conversations, exploring common concerns and compromising. That is the nature and the goal of democracy.

Judaism has something to say about our leaders’ behavior. In his commentary on Leviticus 4:22, 10th century commentator Rashi teaches us that a community is healthier when its leader is able to recognize his or her mistakes, a process that requires humility and respect. We call on all elected officials to act as examples and model reconciliation.

This is a moment of enormous change in Wisconsin and around the country, a time of austerity and sacrifice. We must find a way to share the sacrifice equitably.

As the JCRC engages the community in building consensus, we will consider all sides and carefully weigh the range of perspectives and thought. We will look at the issues through multiple Jewish lenses, keeping in mind the words of Isaiah 56:1, “Observe what is right and do what is just.”

*Joyce Altman and Elana Kahn-Oren are chair and director, respectively, of the Jewish Community Relations Council of the Milwaukee Jewish Federation.*