

JCRC Annual Meeting 2018
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Director's Report
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Community relations is built on the most basic notion that relationships are the engine of humanity.

They are the key to all social movement. Everything that happens — love, marriage, job offers, business deals, regulations and laws, and the coming together and moving apart of community — happens because we change hearts and minds through relationships.

As John Steinbeck wrote, “It means very little to know that a million Chinese are starving unless you know one Chinese who is starving.” Through relationships, we are invited to see the world through each other’s eyes, and to see others as they see themselves. That process is the key to empathy and compassion.

Through relationships, we bring into focus people who we previously looked past, transforming Others into to actual human beings with inherent value.

Life happens on the personal level. Who we know, how we feel, what we think ... determines every choice we make.

Having safe and trusting relationships allows us to talk about uncomfortable things, to stumble, to not know, to ask, and to gradually see with new eyes. Think of how we have evolved in our understandings of gender, sexuality, and race.

Our tradition teaches that all people were created in the image of God. As Rabbi Yitz Greenberg taught during a 2016 Catholic-Jewish Conference program, to be created in the image of God compels us to treat each person with care because we are all Divine, we are all of infinite value, all equal to each other, and we are each unique. What kind of world would we have if we treated all others as equal and valuable?

This translates into action. Relationships are the starting point for doing the critical work of healing our fractured world, of interrupting bigotry when we see it. Knowing an African American or Latino or immigrant or LGBTQ person or Muslim or Christian or Sikh or Hindu or Buddhist or Jew allows us to see the other as reflections of the divine and therefore deserving of our defense, protection, and friendship.

Through relationships, we shine a light on issues for lawmakers, setting stakes and accountability. Through relationships, wars are averted and conflicts resolved. Since the beginning of time, people and communities have approached those in power to plead for compassion. Time after time, it has worked.

During the Civil War, when Ulysses S. Grant gave the General Order 11 in 1862 to expel Jews from the Department of the Tennessee, Jews organized and approached neighbors, journalists, and elected leaders, including President Lincoln, to have the order reversed, successfully.

As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks has said, “conversation is the heart of democratic politics and the only hope for civic or maybe even global peace.”

About 100 years ago, the American Jewish community wisely decided to invest in relationships as the key to our security. In 1938, with rising anti-Semitism at home in Milwaukee and the beginnings of the genocide in Europe that wiped out one third of all the world’s Jews, Milwaukee established this enterprise as a way to protect Jews by knowing our neighbors, meeting with our elected officials, working with civic leaders.

That principle still holds. Eighty years later, our JCRC works to build a safer and more hospitable community for Jews and all people through the most basic process of knowing each other.

We see its effects all the time, when our interfaith and Intergroup allies remind others why Jews are worth protecting and respecting. Every time a local leader articulates why community events should not be held on the Jewish High Holidays, our relationships are working. When a minister interrupts anti-Judaism in his or her church, our relationships are working. When a community activist refuses to simplify the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to a cartoon conflict between

good and evil and instead chooses to see the humanity of both Palestinians and Israelis, relationships are working.

The weight of responsibility is on all of us. The key to being understood is seeking to understand others and asking ourselves, "What is needed of me?" The work of community relations is to help create a better world by being the neighbors that we want for ourselves.

I feel grateful to do this work, the most essential and important work I know. Thank you for being here. Thank you to our volunteer leaders and many partners for working together to making our world safer and more just for all of us.

And now to our keynote speaker.