



JCC Movement
**Vision and Statement
of Principles** for
the 21st Century



JCCs of North America
מרכזים קהילתיים יהודיים בצפון אמריקה





We present this JCC Movement Vision and Statement of Principles for the 21st Century with great pleasure and pride. It reflects over “1000 Jewish Conversations” that were initiated at the 2010 Biennial in Atlanta with the question: “What kind of Jewish lives do people want to lead, and how can we make it possible for them to do so?” Through the leadership of our metropolitan JCC executives, a serious discussion began, which continued throughout the year in gatherings of more than 70 JCC executives, with colleagues in Israel, and at well over 30 JCC boards. The conversations centered on five critical aspects of JCCs:



- The JCC is a builder of Jewish identity, and plays a critical role for individuals and families in stimulating and supporting the search for lives of Jewish meaning and purpose.
- The JCC clearly both builds Jewish community, and communities, while engaging actively with the larger community around it, bringing Jewish life, values, and culture to the broader community.
- The JCC is a convener, a “living room” where discussions on controversial topics can take place in open and inviting and respectful ways.
- The JCC is a connector to other Jewish organizations and institutions.
- The JCC brings its members and the community closer to Israel and to Jewish people around the world.



A Jewish Community Center, by its nature, is a local institution and reflects the reality of its community. This vision and these principles express the shared beliefs that bind us together as a continental JCC Movement. It is also a living document that, in the best of our tradition, invites ongoing commentary and conversation. It will understandably take on both local and continental nuances. The adoption of this Statement of Principles is an historic moment in the evolution of the JCC Movement as a significant force in North American Jewish life.



We would like to give special thanks to the metropolitan executives group for their initiative in this endeavor; to Mark Sokoll and Carol Trager of the JCCs of Greater Boston for drafting the original statement; and to literally thousands of JCC lay and professional leaders for their serious deliberation and input.



With gratitude,

Paula L. Sidman

Paula L. Sidman
Chair, JCC Association
Board of Directors

Allan Finkelstein

Allan Finkelstein
President & CEO
JCC Association

“A new context inevitably will demand far-reaching changes in the very nature of Jewishness and its institutional expressions.”

– Rabbi Irwin Kula, The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership (CLAL)

Since the mid-1990s, the JCC Movement has articulated a vision “to maximize the use of the programs and services, the position in the community, and the accessibility of the Jewish Community Center to welcome all Jews, to help each Jew move along a continuum of Jewish growth, and to build Jewish memories.”¹ Nearly twenty years later, the changing landscape of North American Jewish life prompts us to present this new JCC Statement of Principles for the 21st Century.

Introduction

In every generation, the term “Jewish community” has taken on new meaning as Jews have adapted their lives to changing circumstances. In this generation, unprecedented freedom of choice from where to live or work and whom to befriend and/or marry, from how to identify oneself and whether or not to raise a family, and even the definition of family, has vastly transformed the nature of Jewish communal life and the JCC Movement.

The JCC’s post-World War II goal of recreating Jewish urban neighborhoods in suburban settings was designed for a community that was largely homogeneous. Today, however, that monolithic community has evolved into a new reality where individual Jews move freely in and among multiple communities, identify themselves in various ways, and hold diverse views on many issues, including Israel. We must change if we are to remain an asset to the people we aspire to serve. We must acknowledge that Jewish institutions, JCCs included, must evolve to meet people’s needs in entirely new ways.

So what is our responsibility to a community that is increasingly diverse, geographically dispersed, and arguably more discerning than any that has gone before? Can JCCs offer this diverse people a set of services that is relevant, accessible—and financially sustainable?

Why the JCC?

The JCC’s heritage and assets uniquely position the organization and movement to be successful in serving contemporary Jewry. Our name reflects this: we have the ability to create a sense of belonging that is infused with meaning for a community of individuals. The JCC has the greatest reach of any Jewish communal organization, and has the capacity to support individuals’ and families’ aspirations to engage and to learn. We already develop and offer rich programming that is both place-based (i.e., JCCs, camps and preschools) and portable (not contingent on bricks and mortar), responding to the increasing geographical dispersion of Jews in many metropolitan areas. Now, embracing our collective diversity and accepting our constituents as they are, we are, and can continue to be, their partner as they grow as people and Jews in the 21st century.

¹ Committee on Maximizing Jewish Education and Effectiveness II (COMJEE II), 1995.

In this spirit, we declare this

JCC Movement Vision and Statement of Principles for the 21st Century



The vision of the JCC Movement is to create a vibrant and welcoming Jewish environment that encourages people to lead engaged lives of meaning and purpose.

We believe the JCC is a primary destination for Jewish engagement, a locus of learning and celebration and a connector to Jewish life: a place where individuals and families can encounter Jewish ideas, principles, practices, and values; where they encounter Israel and explore the ideal of Jewish peoplehood in their lives; and a public square for convening important conversations both within the Jewish and among the broader community.

JCC programs, services, and connections will support a diverse and thriving Jewish people—and as appropriate, the broader community—in making fulfilling and healthy life choices. Through this work, we will model a world in which, more than ever, Jewish wisdom is valued; differences are respected; communities are built; creativity is encouraged, and aspirations are realized in exciting and powerful new ways.

The JCC's primary purpose is to strengthen Jewish life and is built upon these principles:

- Creating a Jewish identity is a unique and individual life-long process.
- Respecting and supporting diverse Jewish opinions, beliefs, and practices are essential for strong and enduring Jewish communities.
- Interaction between diverse groups of Jews is critical for the well-being and future of the Jewish people.
- Jewish living and learning sit at the heart of the JCC.
- Israel is an eternal birthright of the Jewish people, linking us to our past and to Jews around the world today.
- Strong Jewish communities benefit, and benefit from, their larger communities.



FAQs

Why do we need a statement of principles?

The JCC Movement comprises many communities of Jews (and non-Jews) spread across North America, with very different approaches to Jewish living and learning. The statement of principles unites these communities and individuals by articulating the core values that animate the JCC Movement and distinguish it from other movements in Jewish life.

What do we mean by the JCC Movement?

The JCC Movement is driven by a vision of Jewish living based on individual meaning. The JCC Movement's Jewish mission is to strengthen Jewish communal living in North America. The statement of principles helps guide its members' activities as they pursue the goal of strong and vibrant Jewish communities. Anybody who shares that vision of Jewish communal living, whose life is informed by its principles, and participates in JCC programs, thereby helping achieve the vision, is part of the JCC Movement.

Why is being "a primary destination" important?

The JCC Movement believes every Jewish institution (schools, synagogues, museums, libraries, camps, and JCCs) is simultaneously a destination for Jewish engagement, and a portal to Jewish communal life. No institution is THE destination. Since it is the individual who determines the journey's path, it is important to recognize the significance the JCC may play. For some, the JCC is their Jewish home. For others, the JCC is one among many Jewish institutions that engage them Jewishly. What is critical is the community provides a variety of options for Jewish engagement. Each is important. Each is necessary. Each is legitimate.

Does this mean JCCs are competing with synagogues?

Not at all. As stated above, the JCC Movement believes synagogues are important and necessary institutions for Jewish life. It also recognizes JCCs and synagogues share the same ultimate goal: strong, vibrant Jewish communities. However, synagogues look at Jewish life mostly through the lens of Judaism, the religion of the Jewish people. JCCs look at Jewish life mostly through the lens of Jewishness, or the more general culture of the Jewish people. In the end, it is up to the individual to choose which approach to Jewish life is meaningful to them.

What does "being a connector to Jewish life" mean?

The JCC Movement agrees with Elizabeth Herzog and Mark Zborowski: *Life Is with People*. It understands that JCCs create community by encouraging relationships between members. It is the inter-personal connection, not the institutional affiliation, that engages and links individuals with Jewish living and learning. Those relationships are the catalyst for exploring institutions beyond the JCC. Whether the relationships remain within the JCC, or serve as a bridge to other institutions, the JCC serves as a connector and a relationship builder.

Why doesn't the statement of principles define what Jewish identity is?

The JCC Movement doesn't presume to define what being Jewish should mean to its members. It is committed to creating ways for individuals to explore Jewish ideas to create their own Jewish identity.

Why is diversity so important to the JCC Movement?

Diversity is a fact of life in the twenty-first century. The JCC Movement recognizes the increasingly global and pluralistic orientation of society and of the Jewish community. At the same time, it understands the importance of feeling rooted in a community. The JCC Movement believes a diverse Jewish community is a strong Jewish community.

Does "Jewish living and learning sit at the heart of the JCC," mean the JCC is going to try to get me to be ritually observant?

No. The JCC believes that diverse Jewish opinions, beliefs, and practices are essential for strong and enduring Jewish communities. That means the JCC is committed to creating opportunities for people to engage with Jewish ideas, so they can choose the expression of Jewish identity that is meaningful to them from a position of knowledge and experience rather than ignorance.

Why doesn't the statement of principles say more about the general community?

The JCC Movement believes the primary mission of the JCC is to strengthen the Jewish community. Simultaneously, it recognizes the many blessings that have accrued to the Jewish community in North America and acknowledges the responsibility it has to seek the well-being of the larger community.

Why doesn't the statement of principles just tell me what to do?

The statement of principles provides two things to help you: a vision of what JCCs can be, and a set of principles to guide JCCs' decisions as they work to achieve that vision. The JCC Movement recognizes there is more than one way to "be true" to these principles and knows that JCCs need to apply the principles in ways that make sense for them. The principles tie us together as a movement, but they don't tie a JCC's hands as an institution. They are statements of principle, not statements of purpose or practice.

What happens next?

JCC Association is scheduling a series of webinars to help explore the application of the principles to JCC life. In addition, a set of teaching materials are being prepared for use by JCC boards and staff. Stay tuned.

What difference will the statement of principles make over time?

The statement of principles articulates the core values of the JCC Movement and identifies what makes the movement distinct in Jewish life. It provides JCCs a conceptual framework to guide their work. This will enhance the ability of JCCs to engage Jews and non-Jews in serious examination of Jewish life.

Ultimately, the statement of principles will help the JCC Movement be more effective in achieving its goal of strengthening the Jewish community.

For examples of current JCC programs that embody the spirit of the Vision & Statement of Principles, please visit [jcca.org/principles-in-action/](https://www.jcca.org/principles-in-action/).

Commentary

from leading Jewish thinkers about this document:

The JCC Movement Statement of Principles for the 21st Century is simply outstanding. It is significant not only for its relevance to JCCs but as a document which presents a profound vision for Jewish life. By not searching for the lowest common denominator, yet being acutely aware of the realities of Jewish life, it both challenges and inspires.

Phrases such as “engaged lives of meaning and purpose,” “Jewish identity is a unique and individual life-long process,” and “locus of learning and celebration,” take the Jewish conversation to new heights and depth which transcend most of the educational programming currently undertaken within the Jewish community.

We desperately need “a new public square for convening important conversations” about the content and direction of Jewish life. A movement which is aspirational and which fosters pluralism both in theory and in practice is uniquely situated to serve as such a public square and to lead the conversation.

— **RABBI DR. DONNIEL HARTMAN**
Shalom Hartman Institute;
Director of the Engaging Israel Project

The new JCC statement of principles takes a central institution in all of our lives and moves it forward to a new century with new challenges, challenges that must be met with an enhanced sense of Jewish values, Jewish meaning and Jewish community. Because you cannot be a Jew alone, the JCC continues to make Jewish living and learning in the presence of the community robust and vital. The new statement of principles affirms it.

— **DR. ERICA BROWN**
Author and scholar-in-residence for the
Jewish Federation of Greater Washington

Your document is a wise focus on the increasingly heterogenous Jewish community and an equally wise focus—among other things—on the significance of learning which can help unify even a diverse, heterogenous community. So that even as we become a broader people we can still maintain the values which have long distinguished Judaism, while finding innovative ways to communicate them to the world.

— **RABBI JOSEPH TELUSHKIN**

The vision of the 21st century JCC is superbly captured in its name. A center for the growth of Jewishness and community in all their complementary diverse manifestations.

— **RABBI REUVEN KIMELMAN**
Brandeis University

The JCC Movement Statement of Principles for the 21st Century ensures JCCs, already gems in so many communities, will continue to offer cutting edge, creative programs of Jewish learning, making them “the most exciting Jewish place in town.”

— **DR. DEBORAH LIPSTADT**
Emory University

It’s a beautiful document, one which reminds me of why I so deeply respect the JCC Movement and so appreciate the work done by JCCs. Expanding access, enriching experience, creating community, and using Jewish to help all people live with greater meaning and joy—that is how the next great era in Jewish life will be built, and it’s what JCCs do, at their very best, each and every day.

— **RABBI BRADLEY HIRSCHFIELD**
President CLAL-The National Jewish Center
for Learning and Leadership

The JCC vision and statement of principles for the twenty-first century is right in so many ways. It grasps the changed nature of Jewish organizations. In the not-too-distant past, the role of Jewish institutions was to organize Jews to fulfill their mission within the bounds of the inherited culture of the organization.

Today, Jewish organizations and synagogues have to transform themselves into platforms that mobilize individuals to self-organize and express and explore their identities within the mission of the organization. Personal exploration is the pathway to appreciating the value of Jewish community.

This is a paradigm revolution and the JCC is once again in the vanguard.

— **RABBI HAYIM HERRING**
Founding Director,
Synagogue Transformation and Renewal (STAR)

For more than a century, JCCs have been a vital part of the American Jewish story. With this bold statement of principles, the JCC Movement again demonstrates its readiness to meet the needs and aspirations of a changing population in a changing world, while holding fast to and deepening its commitment to Jewish values and tradition.

JCCs recognize that even in our individuality and diversity, there are threads that unite us: a quest for meaning and purpose in our lives, and a desire to connect with others, both intimately in our own communities and around the globe.

These principles position the JCC Movement to play a key role in twenty-first century Jewish life as a setting where Jews can come together to learn, celebrate, converse, and do good, thereby finding personal satisfaction and strengthening the fabric of community that is at the heart of JCCs’ mission.

— **DR. JONATHAN WOOCHEER**
Chief Ideas Officer, JESNA;
Director, Lippman Kanfer Institute

Join the conversation.

Visit jcca.org/commentary/ to view more opinions, share your thoughts, and help bring these ideas to life at JCCs throughout North America.



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