

JCPA Conference Tackles Engagement, Security

BY MAXINE DOVERE
WASHINGTON, D.C.

In his opening remarks at The Path Forward, the 2017 conference of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA), president and CEO David Bernstein called for public officials “to do everything in their power to put a stop to [anti-Semitic] threats and incidents,” hoping that “radical elements will be kept in check.”

Cheryl Fishbein, JCPA chairwoman, offered a similar warning, saying, “We urge the president to continue to speak out against these threats against the Jewish community and other minority groups.”

The three-day meeting occurred at a time when more than 100 Jewish institutions have received bomb threats, Jewish cemeteries have been desecrated and swastikas have been sprayed on playgrounds and cars. Some 200 leaders of 125 community and 16 national member agencies—federations, Jewish community centers and Jewish Community Relations councils—gathered to discuss topics ranging from how to reinvigorate the once-strong relationships between the black and Jewish communities to establishing workable borders and conditions needed to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the mirror of the 50th anniversary of the Six Day War. The battles against anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, the global refugee/humanitarian crisis, criminal justice reform and America as a Nation of Immigrants were also addressed.

At the initial plenary session, Criminal Justice Reform: Reengaging the Jewish Community in Civil Rights, Rabbi Jonah Pesner, director of the Religious Action Center of the Reform Movement, and Glenn E. Martin, a “graduate” of the New York State prison system and founder of JustLeadershipUSA, a criminal justice reform advocacy organization, concurred that we must “re-engage the Jewish community in civilrights—a historically powerful relationship—to stand on the shoulders of giants.”

Martin said, “I am not the exception. Don’t divide the population. Pay attention to how we got here; it has little to do with good and bad. It takes people who are close to the problem to work with the people of privilege to find the solution.”

Cautioned Pesner, “The justice system is the opposite of what Torah has in mind. The first law is you shall love the stranger. (NB: More than 15,000

Jews are incarcerated; there are four prison-based synagogues in the United States.)

Within its policy statements, JCPA called for implementation of the Anti-Defamation League’s anti-hate recommendations including fighting hate at local and national levels, protecting university students from religious harassment and discrimination, and developing hate-crime response techniques.

William C. Daroff, senior vice president for Public Policy and director of the Washington Office of the Jewish Federations of North America, was honored February 26 with the JCPA Tikun Olam (Repair the World) Award. “We must ensure,” he said, “that we welcome Jews of all stripes, regardless of specifics, to encourage all means of Jewish engagement that meet people where they are.... We must provide a Jewish umbrella under which Jews can express themselves.... however people want to engage with the Jewish community.”

Daroff reminded the Jewish community that its responsibility is to be helpful in a divisive world, saying Jews should “seek to bring together a bipartisan supermajority to provide assistance for Holocaust survivors, to help our country and our people through whatever means or institutions.

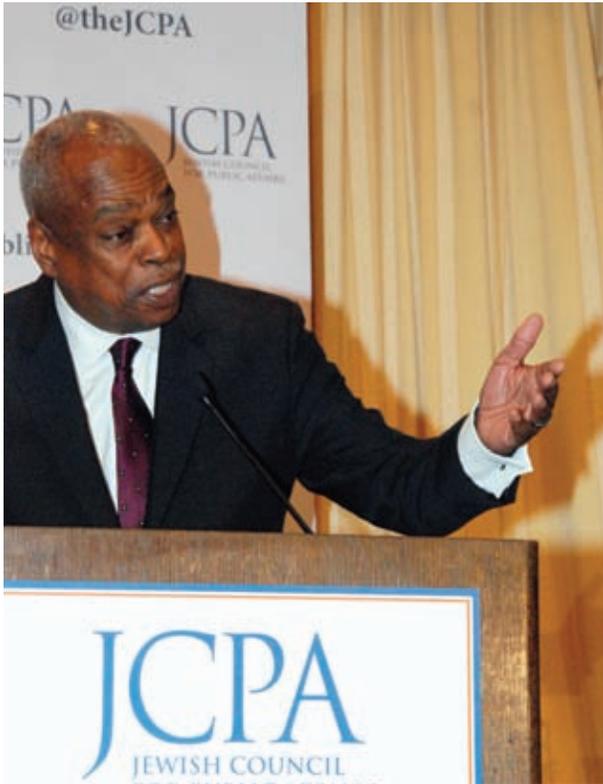
“Tikun Olam,” said Daroff, “has been defined in many ways. We are challenged by the commandment to pursue a more just world....To survive as Jews we must be optimists.”

Wade Henderson, president of and counsel to the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights—described as “eloquent, brilliant, inspiring... an accomplished coalition builder” by JCPA Board member David Saperstein—was the *tzedek* (righteous) awardee. He spoke of the shared history of the Jewish and black communities during the civil rights movement, and of the current imperative that “everyone should be appalled by the rise of anti-Semitism...the rise in hate crimes and violence and threats to diverse communities. This historic moment presents obvious challenges, but also the opportunity to protect the rights and freedoms we enjoy as Americans.” Henderson concluded, “If you’re not practicing the politics of coalition, you are not practicing the politics of the 21st century.



Above: Cheryl Fishbein, JCPA chairwoman
Below: Rabbi Jonah Pesner, director of the Religious Action Center of the Reform Movement
PHOTOS BY MAXINE DOVERE

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Wade Henderson, President of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights and counsel to the Leadership Conference Education Fund



Tamara Cofman Wittes and Aaron David Miller, Vice President for New Initiatives and a Distinguished Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars



William Daroff, senior vice president for Public Policy and director of the Washington Office of the Jewish Federations of North America, recipient of the Tikun Olam Repair the World - Award



RIGHT: Glenn E. Martin, founder of JustLeadershipUSA