

Caring for Those Beyond Us

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Once upon a time a cup of coffee cost a dime. Back then, who would have expected people, would someday spend multiple dollars for the same product at Starbucks?

But times change and so do institutions!

That's what makes the history of Springfield's Jewish institutions so fascinating – and a little bit unexpected as well.

Aside from the various synagogues that have grown up in the area, consider the four communal organizations that all began a little over 100 years ago.

For example, what we know as the Jewish Community Center began in 1895 when a Jewish High School student in Springfield organized the Young Men's Hebrew Association. To be honest, Henry Lasker organized a YMHA because the members of the Young Men's Christian Association were not interested in spending time with Jews.

But here's the unexpected outcome: Even though the YMHA (later JCC) was founded by Jews because non-Jews wouldn't allow them to be part of their world, the JCC of today is a wide-open institution. Of course, the JCC still values Jewish continuity and learning, but the doors of the JCC are open to everyone.

Consider one of the JCC's finest initiatives. It's called Kehillah, which means "community" in Hebrew. And "community" is the key. With this program, the JCC reaches out to children and adults with special needs throughout our area. The goal is to provide a safe and nurturing environment for people of all faiths with cognitive and developmental delays, Down syndrome and autism spectrum disorders.

Kehillah is a gift from the JCC to everyone in our area.

For that matter, did you ever wonder how Rachel's Table came to be? Rachel's Table is an organization in Springfield that has worked to alleviate hunger and reduce food waste since 1992. Six days a week, more than 200 volunteers collect food from local supermarkets and restaurants and deliver it to 43 agencies from soup kitchens to shelters.

It turns out that Rachel's Table is a project of another local Jewish communal institution. Rachel's Table is sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Western Massachusetts – an organization with roots inside the Jewish world that has opened its doors for all.

The same holds true for Jewish Family Service of Western Massachusetts which began in the 1890's. In those days, poverty in the Jewish community led leaders of the community to band together so that, in their words, they could "reach and relieve all those Jewish people of Springfield who are found to be in need."

Times change. Needs remain in the Jewish community, but Jewish Family Service has also done the unexpected. It has grown into an agency with Jewish roots that serves the full Springfield community. Among other programs, for example, JFS is a major address for refugee resettlement in our area. Every year JFS settles over 100 refugees from all around the globe. And, by the way, JFS is the center of adoption services throughout the Pioneer Valley.

And so it goes: 100 years ago members of the Jewish community saw that their elderly needed a place to be cared for when they could no longer live at home. The Daughters of Zion Home for the Aged was founded in 1912 offering residential care for 12 Jewish residents. The institution moved to its present location on Converse Street in Longmeadow in 1972 and grew to be a 200-bed facility. In 1992, the Home for the Aged became Jewish Geriatric Services.

Since that time, JGS has become the hub of just about every service any senior of any faith might need. This includes the skilled nursing home, short-term rehabilitation care, assisted living, home health care, hospice, adult day care, and even subsidized independent living.

What began as a service for the Jewish community has grown to be a resource for everyone.

That's not the way it all began. When Jews first came to Springfield, the world was a different place. Communal barriers were solid. People lived and worked in a very narrow world. But the world has changed and horizons have broadened.

That is what has made it possible and natural for the Jewish community to share larger blessings with the neighbors. It's good to part of one's own ethnic group; it's remarkable to be part of the larger world as well.

That's what happens when Springfield and America are at their best.