

## Weinstein Award Acceptance Speech

Uri Cohen, September 8, 2009

Chaverim, Horai, v'Rabotai – Thank you, one and all, for coming tonight, and for joining tonight's program and celebration. I am honored, humbled, and gratified to be standing before you tonight, to receive the inaugural Weinstein Award, and I am grateful to all those who helped make this evening possible. But more on that in a few moments.

Tonight marks many celebrations rolled into one:

- First, I am personally honored to have been selected to receive this Award. It is tremendously gratifying and fulfilling to know that a project into which I have invested so much is being recognized as a success. Tonight is a celebration of organizational success that I share fully with my team and its funders.
- Second, as a group we celebrate tonight the vision of Irving Weinstein, Ezra Levin, and the Jewish Community Relations Council in making this Award into a serious recognition for and support of Jewish Accord as an item that should rank highly on our communal agenda.
- And third, as a Jewish community, we celebrate the nexus of vision, support and professionalism in taking significant strides towards making a better, stronger Jewish community for both this and the next Jewish generation via work on a topic of objectively strategic importance.

Indeed, as excited as I am personally to receive the Award, I am far more excited and invigorated **that the Weinstein Award exists to be given.** My team and I have long felt that Jewish accord deserves a higher level of priority, and we have worked hard to advance that agenda through our efforts. This award validates that work and understanding, and charges each and every person in this room – professional, volunteer, or observer - to answer the call and do your part – however big or small – to promote unity and accord amongst the disparate parts of the Jewish community through your very thoughts, actions, attitudes and your very words.

Of course, neither the concept of pursuing Jewish accord, nor the precedent that Jews can and should come together to celebrate that which they share in common, is particularly new. In fact, this reveals another reason why tonight is a celebration – we are here to recognize a critical success of one of our community’s most important programs and investments. Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life touches hundreds of thousands of Jewish college students each year, teaching them how Jewish community *can* be, and training them how to seek out and build the Jewish community they desire for the future.

In founding Tikvat Yisrael and seeking to create the reality its mission describes, we the founders stole Hillel’s modus operandi *virtually exactly*. The 7 or 8 of us who founded Tikvat Yisrael came from highly successful Hillel campuses – Penn, Columbia, Harvard, NYU, etc. Yes, these are the usual suspect success campuses – but look what happened! Our Hillels trained us so well that we even came to believe that **real life** could be that way! We were taught by real life example that different groups of Jews can **actually come together and reinforce each other not despite their difference but because of them**. When I was a student at Penn, I lived with guys who attended a different service than I did every Shabbat. Yet, we walked to Hillel together, went our separate ways for services (I went upstairs and they went down the hall), and then we all came together again afterwards for Kiddush. Our Hillel at Penn felt like a real community, and I was fortunate to be a student leader there, serving both the individual and wider communities, as Gabbai of two minyanim, the head student Mashgiah overseeing kosher food, and a member of the Board of Directors for one year.

That sense of community is what was missing when I came to New York’s Upper West Side. In stark contrast to the Penn campus where the size of the Jewish community’s critical mass determined what Jewish options were available, in New York there is virtually something for everyone. The feeling of commonality was gone because we no longer knew each other, had to work together, or – to borrow from Daniel Elazar - had any common Jewish rhythms. There was no longer the need or impetus for the community to come together except in crisis. Everyone was so concerned about the four

walls of their synagogue, they didn't have time for the wider Jewish community. Skeptics might say, "It's New York! How can such a large community ever be expected to join together? Maybe Jewish accord doesn't apply or isn't necessary in the real world! It's too big!"

We, Tikvat Yisrael's founders, decided that wasn't good enough – that we had to start somewhere. In fact, we reasoned that in some ways, New York is not the real world. More Jewish communities on this planet are more like Penn than like New York! We also figured that because of its size, if we could field a solution in New York, it could work anywhere. So we decided to act.

We identified *tefillah* – religious prayer – as an element of authentic and meaningful Jewish life that binds our community together, across denominational or other dividing lines. Not all Jews pray, of course, but then again so many do! Where there's a synagogue there's prayer, and there certainly are a lot of synagogues of all stripes and colors. We worship-inclined Jews may use different words, languages, music, concepts of God, theories on Revelation, gender roles, seating arrangements and furnishing patterns with good reason, but we all gather in prayer. To my mind, prayer is the very most authentic, meaningful, and familial bond the Jewish community has. We should not be afraid of the differences prayer will expose – we should embrace the family ties prayer represents. This turns the common approach to intensely-held differences on its head.

I tried to come up with a joke about the guy driving a Chevy Suburban and weaving across the lanes as he drives down the highway and gets pulled over by a police officer. After the man passed a sobriety test, the officer said to him, "What are you doing? Why were you driving like such a maniac! The man answered, "I'm so sorry officer – I'm just so tired! I'm in charge of penguin safety in this state, and I am just not getting any sleep. I keep trying to take the penguins to the zoo, but they refuse to all go to the same place! This one has to go to one, this one to another, a third to yet another – it's driving me crazy!" The officer thought a moment, and then said, "Have you asked the penguins why

they're being so picky?" The man said, "They claim irreconcilable differences! Half say they're black with white fronts, others say no, they're white with black backs!"

While I do believe that self-identifying Jews are a bit more different than the penguins, I maintain that there is something about Judaism that makes us more similar than we are different. There's some way in which each part of the Jewish community relates to each other part in a way that is culturally, socially and religiously unique to us Jews.

I've been trying figure out how to show this graphically. Elazar suggests the "magnet model," of Jewish community. He identifies a group he calls the "Integral Jews," who spend their lives in what he calls a "Jewish rhythm" – the Shabbat observers, kosher food eaters, weekly or daily pray-ers, etc. This group occupies the center of the magnetic field, and other groups drift out from center, in decreasing order of the Jewishness of their rhythms – all the way out to "Quasi-Jews" who may or may not be Jewish by any definition. Today, however, many believe that Elazar's model no longer applies – our community is too diverse - there are too many disparate Jewish rhythms to distinguish between these groups or make such distinctions functionally or substantively relevant.

My friend and colleague Rabbi Hayim Herring proposes a "Network" construction of Jewish community, offering that Jewish community resembles a network of computers that are connected to each other in serial ways – not necessarily through a central hub (the synagogue). Even so, he is working to revitalize the synagogue as a powerful Jewish community hub through his work with STAR – Synagogue Transformation And Renewal.

However, It is only recently that what I think is the right metaphor that describes the Jewish community as I perceive it finally crystallized for me. It is really this construction that Tikvat Yisrael has been trying to realize – and we even put it on our logo in disguise. **It's all about connecting the dots** [POINT TO THE DOTS ON THE TY LOGO SIGN].



The dots on our logo represent denominations and other Jewish backgrounds from which Jews come. By creating authentic Jewish bonds between these dots that represent meaningful and popular Jewish expression, we start to identify what stands at the core of the relationship between Jews. The resulting image, even once you get past the stylistic (and convenient) representation of the Jewish star, is a web – a **web** of connections that represents what makes Jews Jews.

Over the past 5+ years Tikvat Yisrael has focused on the fundamental Jewish bond represented by *tefillah* because it was unrecognized, feared and untapped. Mostly viewed as a hot-button issue, we believe that the Jewish community’s widespread commitment to prayer is not as much a landmine as it is a powerful bond. As some groups discussed earlier in tonight’s program, however, it is clear that there are also other such bonds. Social Justice, the environment, Israel, and other issues unite the Jewish community in powerful and widespread ways. The graphical description that emerges for me is not a magnet, and not a network, but rather a Web.

[USE FLIPCHART HERE. FILL IN THE SILOS IN COLORS]

We often think of the Jewish community broken into silos. For our purposes tonight, I’m representing the four “movements” as vertical silos. [DRAW VERTICAL SILOS]

As we’ve also discussed, there are important currents of commonality that join Jews **horizontally** across the vertical silos. *Tefillah*, social justice, care for Israel, and others are such horizontal strands. [DRAW HORIZONTAL STRANDS] These weave through

the vertical silos, creating important synergies, but also an awareness that the vertical silos are not independent – rather intricately linked in powerful ways that hold the keys to “reaching the unaffiliated,” “Jewish continuity,” “personally meaningful Judaism,” and many other of our current communal priorities. We must take advantage of our opportunities!

The evidence bears out the theory. Indeed, over the past few years we’ve heard a lot about “post-denominationalism,” “trans-denominationalism.” The success of unaffiliated independent minyanim like Kehilat Hadar, Jewish learning organizations like Limmud, and environmental organizations like Hazon demonstrate not only a willingness but a desire to “cross party lines” and **just get the job done** – inspiring Jews, doing acts of chesed, and making Torah deeply meaningful and instructive in real life, rather than rote, drab, and guilt-ridden. These and other organizations are attracting participants in droves.

We are most fortunate that the community is developing in this way, and it is a tribute to those in this room and elsewhere who have spent so much time and money investing not only in the next generation, but also in the Jewish present. May it be God’s will that this continues – we are blessed to have such devoted volunteers, funders and professionals who are “osekim betzorchei tzibbur be’emunah” – faithfully occupied with the needs of the community. I also hope that we will be enlightened enough to recognize and support our successes, and evaluate our forward progress. Needs change as generations pass, but this evolution is hardly random – the seeds of change are sown early, and often on purpose. If only we can identify the cause and effect! Our community educational institutions are graduating new classes of students each year, ready to put what they’ve learned to use and to the test. We need to make sure we let them, welcome them, and help them.

We are ready to do our part. Over the next few months, you’ll be hearing about a new Tikvat Yisrael initiative – the JWeb Project, which you can already find a bit about on a different but also similar kind of Web at [www.Jwebproject.org](http://www.Jwebproject.org). This project seeks to take a closer look at the Jewish web, study its stitches, and encourage individuals to actively

broaden and deepen it through their normal Jewish activities. More information will be forthcoming about the JWeb project – you can already go to [jwebproject.org](http://jwebproject.org) to sign up for the project email list, and you can be sure that you'll hear more if you come to the next Tikvat Yisrael program on November 13.

It is our hope that this project will help us to begin to answer some key questions that we hope will have a major impact on the Jewish world we are all trying to build. We all must be constantly asking questions such as the following:

- What are we doing to make sure that our successes are sustainable?
- What do we need to do now to make the impact of our success relevant over time?
- What are we doing to support areas of the program that are not the highest performing?
- How can we insure that our community formal and informal education institutions have – as a top priority – the intentional and participatory placement of their students on the Jewish Web?
- In what ways can our “grown-up” community institutions be influenced to embrace their place on the web and welcome their constituents to explore it?
- What are the desired relationships between *individual* Jews at different places on the web?
- What are we doing at the Jewish home by Jewish home level to incline parents of Jewish children to find their place to begin on the web?

Critical in being able to work on these questions is the ability to be able to constantly be mindful of the forest and its trees at the same time. That is why all three of our breakout sessions tonight focused on the question of the interplay between the wider Jewish community and its constituent parts. Each of our speakers represented a different vantage point or approach to the challenge of keeping the specific and broad priorities in balance for the greater good, but each speaker is wholeheartedly committed to that end result. I hope that these sessions stimulated both new ideas and new ways of thinking about Jewish Accord. That is, after all, why we're here tonight, really.

We must be tracking our progress on a household, community, movement, and people-wide basis. After all, the total Jewish community represents only a tiny percentage of the American population, let alone the world population. We Jews may be loud, but it's not because of our numbers. There is simply no excuse for letting politics, fundamentalism, threats, or – worst of all – FEAR stand in the way of creating the best Jewish community we can muster.

As the leaders of the Jewish community, it is incumbent upon us to follow in God's ways as we build the community of the future. While last week's Torah reading outlined the blessings and curses that hang in the balance of the way we live our day-to-day lives **as a people**, next week's reading comforts and strengthens us as we seek to do God's will:

כִּי הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם לֹא־נִפְלְאת הוּא מִמֶּךָ  
 וְלֹא־רְחֹקָה הוּא: ַ לא בַּשָּׁמַיִם הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲלֶה־לָּנוּ  
 הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וַיִּקְחֶהָ לָּנוּ וַיִּשְׁמְעֵנוּ אֶת־הָ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה: ַ וְלֹא־מֵעֵבֶר לַיָּם  
 הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲבֹר־לָּנוּ אֶל־עֵבֶר הַיָּם וַיִּקְחֶהָ לָּנוּ וַיִּשְׁמְעֵנוּ אֶת־הָ  
 וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה: ַ כִּי־קְרוֹב אֵלֶיךָ הַדְּבָר מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבְלִבְבְּךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ:

11. For this commandment which I command you this day, is not hidden from you, nor is it far off.
12. It is not in heaven, that you should say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it, and do it?
13. Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it, and do it?
14. But the word is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it.

Hillels provide us with a model for promoting Jewish unity that works on college campuses, and Tikvat Yisrael has been adapted to work for 20s, 30s, and others in New York. The model is waiting to be built out further, strengthened, and supported in and by the wider Jewish community. We at Tikvat Yisrael will continue to do everything we can to make sure this continues – but everyone's involvement is required. I am so gratified that the JCRC, Mr. Levin, and the Weinstein Fund have identified Jewish Accord as an issue of great importance for our community's future, and I look forward to continuing

my work to make sure that the vision we share for a Jewish community that both feels and acts like a close family comes closer and closer every day.

Before we all run right out to get started on this work, I want to thank a few people for making tonight's celebration and accomplishments possible. First, I'd like to thank Mr. Levin, the JCRC and the JCC for everything, and a special thanks to Craig Miller for his support, partnership, and enthusiasm in making tonight so special. I thank my colleagues and partners Nina Bruder, David Ingber, and Josh Lookstein for their preparation and participation as our discussion leaders. It is always my pleasure to work with each of you.

A special thanks to Dru Greenwood, my nominator for this award for all her help. She was instrumental in getting key funding at a key moment for Tikvat Yisrael through the Synagogue Task Force at UJA-Federation of New York. I and we would not be here tonight without you for many reasons, Dru, and I am so thankful for all your help.

I want to thank all of my Tikvat Yisrael team colleagues – past and present – many of whom are here tonight. It is because of you that the vision we've sought has become so real to this point. It continues to be my honor to work with such dedicated friends and partners.

I want to thank Herb Tobin, Rhoda Weisman, and Steve Lorch for their vigilant guarding of my personal and professional development, and for teaching me how to succeed by both example and instruction.

I want to thank my parents for being here tonight, and for setting very different, but incredibly robust and powerful models for Jewish leadership and education. You remain my chief architects, but also always my two biggest fans, and I can't thank you enough.

I am further blessed that my grandmother Edith Perman Allen is here tonight to celebrate my participation "in the family business." I am both thrilled and humbled to follow in her giant footsteps.

Last, but certainly not least, I want to thank my wife Stacey. She is undying in patience, unendingly supportive, and a wonderful partner in my life's work. Her belief in me is of immeasurable help and nourishment in trying times, and that she stands beside me no matter what means the world to me. It is for her that in some ways my work is selfish: I work toward the world I want our family to inherit, too.

Tonight's celebration is wonderful, but its success will be measured in active steps taken, conversations had, dollars spent, and good words and ideas exchanged when the evening is over and real life takes over again. Thank you all for putting your shoulders to the wheel by coming tonight, and for the commitment you make to carrying the banner for Jewish Accord In Our Time. I look forward to continuing our work together for many years to come.

Thank you.