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Haifa Citizen Rights Center of Yedid – The Association for Community Empowerment

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We Make a Difference

Balancing Advocacy and Service

Marina Zamsky

Shmuel, a forty-six-year-old man who was facing many problems and troubles came to seek help at the Haifa center of Yedid–The Association for Community Empowerment. In the past he was a computer technician, his wife was a librarian, and they both made a respectable living. Various tragic events and illnesses left them in debt, causing financial complications, and leading to their unemployment. Finally, they were forced to leave their house. One day, Shmuel called us and told us he was camped at the beach with his wife and two children.

We got in touch with all bodies that could possibly assist in this case, and in the end, we found a temporary housing solution for the family. In order to give Shmuel a sense of self-importance and dignity, we suggested that he volunteer for Yedid and help others, in spite of the fact that he had difficulties coping with his own problems.

During this time, Yitzhak, an immigrant from Ethiopia who was a divorced single father, found himself unemployed, without any financial means, and unable to pay his mortgage. He was forced to leave his house and was thrown out on the street. Yedid helped him to rent an apartment and to receive rent support from the Ministry of Construction and Housing. We asked him to help us with our work among the Ethiopian immigrant community, and he has become an active and enthusiastic volunteer for Yedid.

Shmuel and Yitzhak met in one of our community organizing groups that bring together people from various socioeconomic backgrounds who are seeking to bring about and promote social change. Hearing the experiences of people who one day find themselves thrown out on the street without a roof over their head, group members decided to initiate a struggle for the right to housing.

Marina Zamsky is a social worker and has been the director of the Haifa Citizen Rights Center of Yedid – The Association for Community Empowerment since 1998. Yedid works on three levels to empower underprivileged populations: individual assistance in exercising social rights, community work, and policy-change advocacy. Combining the three levels, which influence and support each other, allows for better achievements in each. All Yedid's activities are based on volunteer work. We view volunteering as the most efficient mode of empowerment and a way of realizing our dream of solidarity between citizens of various socioeconomic strata who work together towards achieving a common goal.

The first action of the community organizing group was to create a creative and colorful artistic installation, which was presented in the Carmel Center area in Haifa and illustrated the problem of housing. By drawing public and media attention, the installation raised awareness of the problem.

Later on, group members studied the legal aspects of the problem and found a breach in the law that allowed mortgage banks to throw debtors out of their houses. Yedid's legal department formulated a proposal for amending the repossession law, and for two years our lawyer has participated in discussions over the bill. Finally, we reached an impressive accomplishment: the bill was passed by the Knesset and the new law was implemented this year.

While we were celebrating this great achievement we started receiving some disturbing complaints: the banks were trying to get around the new law and to reserve the option of evicting debtors without providing them with alternative housing. We had to appeal to the Superintendent of Banks in order to protest the banks' evasion of the new law, and at the same time we started making use of the new law to postpone and prevent evictions of mortgage debtors.

This story exemplifies how a combination of strategies can lead to social change. The present essay deals with the problem of balancing community service provision and social-change advocacy, as well as other strategies, from various aspects: efficacy in achieving short-term and long-term goals, necessary resources, the benefits for society as well as for individuals, empowerment, and empowerment deficit.

During its first years, Yedid founded many citizen rights centers, which were built in the midst of settlements, neighborhoods, and communities of a low-socioeconomic status. I started working in Yedid in the beginning of 1998 and was lucky to be one of the founders of the first citizen rights center, which was founded in Haifa. The Haifa center is situated in Hadar, a neighborhood with a large disadvantaged population and a clashing mixture of new immigrants, Israeli-born residents, Jews, and Arabs.

Our aim was to establish and offer a different kind of community service — friendly, open, collaborative, empowering. Our first deliberations concerned the center's layout: Should it have a counter or not? A counter communicates a formal and bureaucratic atmosphere but provides a more convenient and discreet environment for both staff and applicants. What is more important for us, creating a friendly, welcoming, and communal atmosphere or a more intimate one? We decided that the interaction between applicants will support the process of mutual empowerment, and for many years, we have had to cope with difficulties arising from lack of privacy.

Assisting individuals with obtaining their social benefits allowed us to fulfill their real needs and to connect with them. In the citizen rights center they not only received tools for solving problems, they also met people with similar stories. The feeling of accomplishment encouraged many applicants to take part in the center's

activities as volunteers; helping others gave them a sense of empowerment and belonging. The first volunteers were recruited from among the applicants, and after six months, there were already about thirty volunteers in the center, most of whom spoke Russian or Arabic. Today, there are over 100 volunteers working in the Haifa center, including former applicants, lawyers, economists, and other members of privileged populations.

We started by providing services, but soon enough we realized the need for advocacy work. First, we discovered that some of the problems we dealt with were the result of deficient formal policies. Second, there is always a danger that developing local community services would release the government from its responsibility to act.

From applicants' appeals, we identified social issues that needed to be systematically resolved both on a local as well as on a national level. Yedid made its resources available to underprivileged populations: it raised public awareness of their problems, and represented them in the arenas of legislation, the justice system, politics, and administration. It used its connections with local communities to provide community support and founded several coalitions with other groups in order to expand the resources available to each group.

Although I realized the need for policy-change activities and in spite of our successes, I was coping all along the way with the dilemmas of a leader: Who directs the process of change? How does advocacy work empower disadvantaged people? How can we engender a natural leadership that grows out of disadvantaged populations?

During my years at Yedid, I always looked for ways to incorporate applicants in our advocacy work. The center in Haifa had to face another challenge: In the course of national-level struggles, the most important events take place in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. How could we make the Haifa applicants feel that they were taking part in the process?

In order to raise public awareness of social problems, many applicants were interviewed and told their personal stories in the public media. The experience of sitting in front of a journalist or even a camera, of sharing their stories with the general public, and of influencing others, strengthened applicants' self-confidence and their belief in themselves, and encouraged them to take responsibility and actively work for social change. Many applicants and volunteers participated in conferences organized by Yedid and, there, had the opportunity to express their opinions about the issue in question. They also attended Knesset committees and took part in meetings with decision makers.

In order to let underprivileged individuals participate in policy-change processes, we used several other strategies, such as publicity, mass recruitment, and public struggles. Yedid reaches hundreds and thousands of people and succeeds in influencing public opinion through publicity and promotion activities, leadership

development projects within the community, and by providing tools for coping with day-to-day problems. We make an effort to include them in the organization's activities on various levels of collaboration, from providing information to cooperating in our actions.

In many of its struggles, Yedid has managed to gain the support of large social groups. Many people have participated in our demonstrations and conferences, signed petitions and collected signatures. For example, during the struggle for the school feeding law, Yedid — through its volunteers, staff, and other activists — succeeded in collecting about 100,000 signatures for a petition supporting the law. The large number of signatures assisted in raising public awareness of the issue, and the law was passed by the Knesset in the preliminary vote.

Since its founding twelve years ago, Yedid has operated many community organizing groups in Haifa and all over Israel. The groups struggle to support various populations. In Haifa, for example, a group of unemployed Arabic speakers arranged to have an Arabic-speaking clerk installed in the Haifa Employment Services Bureau.

These days, we are holding the course “Public Campaign Toolbox” for the third time, which provides local residents with the tools to conduct a public campaign, as part of one of Yedid's groups or for any other organization struggling for a specific cause. Participation in a community organizing group is a very efficient means to accomplish individual and community empowerment.

The story that opened my essay portrays the path of applicant–volunteer–social-change activist that many have taken.

Reflections on the Boston–Haifa Learning Exchange Network

When Donna Haig Friedman invited me to participate in her research, which later produced the wonderful idea of forming a connection between organizations in Haifa and in Boston, I had already been directing the Haifa center for many years, with significant achievements to our credit in providing high-quality community services as well as in advocacy and policy-change work. At the time, I was not bothered by the question of how to balance the two, but I started acknowledging its importance after meeting and talking with colleagues from other organizations. Influenced by these talks, I started examining the question of balancing strategies in the context of the resources required for each type of activity.

The question of what is the most efficient strategy for social change — providing services or changing policies — has been discussed extensively by representatives of the organizations participating in the Boston–Haifa Learning Exchange Network (LEN). It was raised in meetings held in Haifa but was even more dominant in the meeting in Boston. The long-term relationships established in the framework of the

LEN allowed peers to study the variety of models used by organizations in Boston and Haifa. It was a unique opportunity to see how organizations combine a variety of strategies to achieve their goals.

In one of the meetings in Boston, each representative positioned his or her organization on a continuum ranging from service provision on the one end, to advocacy on the other. There was not one organization that was positioned in one of the extremities of the continuum: Each organization combines these two strategies in one way or another. As part of the study process, each organization reached its own conclusions as to what combination of strategies is required for fulfilling its goals and whether there is a need to adjust the balance in order to answer the changing needs of the community for which it works.

Trying to identify the most efficient strategy has led us to examine what organizational resources are available to us and how to transform successes into capacities. I felt that it was not enough to look for answers to these questions by myself, and that the whole staff should be involved in a collaborative evaluation. I used the tools I acquired during the research process, and I asked Donna Haig Friedman and Jennifer Cohen to take part in the teamwork. I organized a staff meeting — the best staff meeting I held during my ten years in Yedid. About fifteen workers and volunteers developed the center’s “strength map.” The results were amazing. We came to understand that we had many accomplishments and that we have many unused in-house and community resources. But the most interesting discovery was that our successes could be used as a resource and that we should use them in order to achieve more success and obtain more resources. That meeting instigated programs for rewarding volunteers and for publishing our stories of success; it even offered insights about how we should use personal stories to raise public awareness of social issues and to promote policy-change activities, and how to use advocacy achievements to assist individual cases.

In addition, we found that other organizations are also interested in the questions of how empowering a leader influences the empowerment of the organization, and how a learning leader turns his or her organization into a learning organization.

In March 2009, during the workshops directed by Donna Haig Friedman and Jennifer Cohen for the Haifa organizations, we took part in a session that demonstrated the process of organizational learning: Yedid’s workers and volunteers were placed in an inner circle — the “aquarium” — while representatives of other organizations observed them from the outer circle. Yedid’s representatives were each asked to express their opinions on their successes and what resources they used in order to achieve them. Each member viewed successes from his or her point of view, but the list of resources turned out to be much longer than anyone expected. This session led to a heated discussion among representatives: not all of them recognized the possibility of learning from successes; many viewed the principles of a learning

organization as quite difficult but, without doubt, as a means for growing and developing. For me, it was a very significant experience. It strengthened my belief in my capability and my responsibility to lead Yedid's staff toward achieving our goals; but people's trust in me presents new challenges all the time.

Participating in the Learning Exchange has given us an opportunity to reexamine the resources, strategies, and actions we employ in the course of our stressful and demanding day-to-day work. It has introduced us to new ideas, perceptions, and audiences, and has strengthened our feeling of belonging to the global community of social-change leaders.

Translated from the Hebrew by Yoram Arnon

