

# GATHER THE PEOPLE

Torah-Based Community Organizing and Development

[www.gatherthepeople.org](http://www.gatherthepeople.org)

## THE PRICE OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT: Precursors to a Strategic Vision for Faith-Based Community Organizing

Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.\*

*New York Times* op-ed writer Bob Herbert wrote a column in 2003 on “Civil Rights, the Sequel.”<sup>1</sup> He cited the punishing history of conditions that we associate with the “. . . decades-long slide into the horrors of violence and degradation for millions of African American youngsters”—massive educational failures, drug and gang activity, imprisonment, AIDS, and, increasingly, suicide.

Now, in 2010, it brought to mind conversations my wife and I have been having with an old friend who has been teaching math at a virtually all-African American high school in Baltimore. Before he began teaching he spent most of his adult life as a community and labor organizer, working with low-income people of color to organize power-building grassroots organizations. We get together every few weeks and he regales us with “war stories”—about a fire set and weapons found, students who never show up or, when they do, seemingly have no purpose other than to disrupt the class for the few who want to learn, indifferent and incompetent administrators, and, of course, his own frustration and exhaustion.

But his most recent revelation was more remarkable than anything we had heard to date. When I lived in Baltimore 25 years ago, teaching community organizing at the University of Maryland School of Social Work, it was a scandal in social work circles that 40 percent of the students who had begun the ninth grade were not graduating from high school. Now we hear the incredibly disheartening news that this year’s graduating class at our friend’s high school has less than 10 percent of the students that began with it in the ninth grade! Even making allowances for transfers, both in and out, and other explanations, the dropout rate at this one high school is certainly greater than 60 percent, possibly closer to 80 percent.

Obviously, the Baltimore school system is not unique. The *New York Times* reported recently that the Houston school district, once regarded as “a pillar of the so-called Texas miracle in education,” is now revealed to have cooked its books<sup>2</sup> and, in fact, has an estimated drop-out rate of at least 40 percent.<sup>3</sup> In an editorial, the *Times* noted that if Houston “. . . is losing

its battle against high school dropouts, it is not alone.”<sup>4</sup> And in almost the same journalistic breath, the *Times* revealed that New York City’s system is “pushing out” those students who are performing poorly and thus having a negative impact on the overall test-score performance of their schools.<sup>5</sup> Apparently, school statistics on students transferring in and out, and therefore dropout rates, are entirely unreliable—almost everywhere.<sup>6</sup>

Not surprisingly, a variety of sources indicate that on-campus violence at public schools in cities throughout the country is also substantially underreported. The situation seemingly is that, “. . . principals, afraid to tarnish their schools’ reputations, are underreporting the problem.”<sup>7</sup> One estimate is that underreporting of violent incidents may be “as high as 50%.”<sup>8</sup> It’s no stretch of the imagination to see a link between these violent incidents and substandard academic achievement. Both commonsense and recognized national studies confirm that, “. . . providing a safe, orderly, peaceful and ‘bully proofed’ school environment contributes to student academic success, while having multiple behavioral problems disrupts proper education.”<sup>9</sup>

My recent experience as a substitute teacher at three all-African American inner-city Baltimore high schools has confirmed for me what periodical and scholarly publications have been reporting. Typical absenteeism in my classes ranged from 25 to 50 percent, similar percentages of students were disinterested in attempting or completing assignments, and, when queried, only one or two students in any class had plans to attend college. At the same time, significant numbers of disruptive students were the norm, both boys and girls, and the maintenance of class order and discipline required constant attention and regularly removing misbehaving students from class.

### *Who’s Responsible?*

Our first inclination is to target the schools—the board of education, the senior managers, the mid-level administrators, and the classroom teachers—for the failures. And undoubtedly they have their share of responsibility.<sup>10</sup> But since Baltimore’s public education enterprise bears at least a passing resemblance to other troubled

big-city school districts, other variables should also be considered.

I interviewed hundreds of public school teachers in San Francisco in the early 1990s as the assistant director of Organize Training Center and as the organizer for its Parent Organizing Project. Repeatedly I heard from teachers that the educational process was better, more capable in every respect, than it had ever been; but the challenges had grown far beyond their capacity to respond to them. Over and over again I heard committed, competent, and caring teachers say that if they had three or four or even a half-dozen troubled youngsters in their classrooms of 25 to 40 students, it wouldn't be a problem. But a third to three-quarters of their students were bringing "baggage"<sup>11</sup> from home that had the effect of preventing the students from learning or the faculty from teaching.

We have known for decades that our epidemic public school failures, gang and drug involvement by youth, teenage pregnancy rates, and the like, are symptoms of macro social, political and economic problems. In his column on renewing the civil rights struggle, Mr. Herbert acknowledged the root economic and social conditions, including joblessness and racism. He nonetheless called for African American family members, including the young people themselves, to no longer turn away from the promise of their future; he called them to account for themselves. And he called on civil rights leaders and their organizations to lead a renewed struggle for civil rights.

What's wrong with these calls? It's certainly not the notion that families, including the young people, have at least a share of the responsibility to reverse the decades-long decline. It's certainly not that civil rights organizations should be doing all within their power to ameliorate the situation.

But they're similar to the calls to educators or police or social workers in the inner-city, or any other group that has been struggling with the problems for decades: They are exhortations to those in the front-line trenches—presumably they should do more and do it better—which may be necessary but are not sufficient. Exhorting them doesn't improve their tools or resources, doesn't offer a strategic vision, and doesn't even propose tactical innovations, which, of course, strictly speaking, isn't the responsibility of a journalist.

### ***Changing the Context***

The inescapable fact is that life will change substantially for millions of inner-city young people only when the political and economic context in which they live their lives has changed. And Mr. Herbert is certainly correct in his assessment that that transformation will not be instigated by local, state, and federal governments or, for that matter, by increasingly lean, mean, global corporations.

There are several outsized obstacles: Far too many urban areas—especially in the Midwest and Northeast—are at an economic dead-end.<sup>12</sup> Baltimore is an excellent example. Industry long ago abandoned the city,<sup>13</sup> infrastructure has deteriorated,<sup>14</sup> the middle class

(including African Americans) has fled, the tax base has been wracked, social capital (i.e., a psychologically and physically healthy,<sup>15</sup> educated, and well-trained workforce) has been decimated, and the city's political influence in the state legislature and Congress has diminished to unheeded entreaties to halt the complete annihilation of a formerly well-nourished and thriving center of commerce and community. With these conditions coupled to institutional racism and discrimination, the present prospects for qualitative improvement in education, employment, and housing are virtually nil.

Their records of malfeasance and nonfeasance leave no doubt that locally, statewide, and nationally, governments have little or no political interest and corporations have little or no economic interest in making major investments that would produce dramatic improvements.<sup>16</sup> Their shared self-interest is the renewal of downtown commercial and financial districts, subsidizing hotels, sports arenas, and tourist attractions, all located within eyesight of thousands of deteriorating and abandoned housing units and their disintegrating neighborhood business districts.

If governments and corporations are not going to initiate and sustain the needed changes, we're left with the citizenry itself as the source and sustenance of a solution strategy. The future of low- and moderate-income families, if they are to have one that realizes their potential, including that of their children, has to be bootstrapped.

This idea is certainly not news to the members, leaders, and staff who have been seeding power-building grassroots organizations in urban areas for the past half-century. We have harvested a bumper crop of neighborhood,<sup>17</sup> congregational, issue- and identity-oriented, and low-wage workers' organizations that have been learning and teaching the lessons of effective participation in civic dialogue and decision-making. These organizations have refined power and won thousands of victories, including affordable housing projects, environmental protections, improved health care, public school reforms, rights for the disabled, gays, women, welfare recipients, and people of color, and living-wage ordinances. Baltimore has many such organizations. One of the newest of these, BRIDGE<sup>18</sup> (Baltimore Regional Initiative Developing Genuine Equality), was launched by more than 1300 citizens in July of 2003 at the city's Church of the Redeemer.

### ***Promising Social Development***

Possibly the most promising result of the last half-century of grassroots struggle for equity, equality, accessibility, and accountability in governmental and corporate institutions has been the emergence of faith-based organizing. Stemming from a tradition of one-to-one, base-building union and neighborhood organizing in recent decades, it is the hope of more than a million citizens<sup>19</sup> who, with the support of numerous network and training organizations, are its protagonists, proponents, and proprietors.<sup>20</sup>

There are two reasons why we may regard this genre of organizing as the most promising:

Although faith-based, it represents in its federated incarnation a form of pluralistic civic religion, the spirit of which is embodied in the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel:

Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehood. The liturgical movement must become a revolutionary movement, seeking to overthrow the forces that continue to destroy the promise, the hope, the vision.<sup>21</sup>

This is not our father's or mother's religion but one born in America's public square, one that recognizes our common pressures, hopes, and humanity, while respecting our different traditions of belief and practice. And it is growing in the fertile fields of American spirituality and longing to remake the day-to-day world in the nearly universal image of God's love, widely understood to be revealed in our reciprocal commitments to righteousness, truth, justice, freedom, peace, and kindness. It may thus be the most promising prospect for attracting tens of millions of Americans to the banner of enlightened social change.

The second reason why we might regard faith-based community organizing as the most promising outcome of the last half-century's grassroots struggles is its turf-based lineage and linkage. It alone of the extant forms of organizing has within its reach the possibility of placing public powers directly in the hands of the citizenry. As Jefferson was convinced, without "public space"—the rights, roles, and resources inherent in public powers—" . . . we shall go on in the endless circle of oppression, rebellion, reformation; and repression, reformation, again; and so on forever." It was Jefferson's belief that the "regularly organized power" of the citizenry would prevent insurrections by providing a practical means "to crush, regularly and peaceably, the usurpations of their unfaithful agents."

Withal, the widespread acquisition of public powers by grassroots organizations will certainly not render other forms of organizing obsolete in any way; turf-based organizing, like all of its sister forms, will always have inherent limitations. But it nevertheless promises to assuage the alienation of impoverished urban ethnic and cultural neighborhoods, and other geographic constituencies that are estranged from civic debate and decision-making—permanently retrieving government in metropolitan regions from the domination of centralized bureaucratic monopolies.

Grassroots neighborhood and congregational organizations, federated through national networks for several decades, until relatively recently only had sufficient political wherewithal to play a sporadic role in municipal decision-making on a handful of selected issues. It has not been helpful that the neighborhood and congregational federations operate in virtual isolation from one another. During the 1990s, however, the national grassroots federations began with greater effect to flex their muscles in state legislatures, winning several significant victories.

The irony of these successes is that they are followed by a period in which state, county, and city governments are confronting their worst fiscal crises since the Great Depression. And for all intents and purposes, the resources required for growth in grassroots organizing—namely, funding and availability of professional staff—have reached a plateau. Without significant enhancement of their resources, the prospects are bleak for qualitative growth in their power.

And unfortunately, withal, it's still true, as it was more than 20 years ago,<sup>22</sup> that a herd of Texas longhorns could be driven through the gap between our aspirations and our accomplishments as grassroots leaders and organizers committed to working for social development. Although our day-to-day organizing objectives typically are modest, reflecting incremental improvements in the lives of people at the grassroots, our social development goal has been ambitious sociopolitical and economic advances, to satisfy the broadest range of human aspirations and interests.

The most widely pursued grassroots strategic goal to date has been to get a seat at the "table of power"—an enduring voice in resource-allocation decisions. Unfortunately, although achieved occasionally at the municipal level, attaining that seat has had only marginal influence on overall policy and practice, and virtually no effect on institutionalized political and economic structures.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the multi-billion dollar *monthly* negative economic impact on social development of organized crime, corrupting politics and youth with its illicit drug industry, and reactionary foreign policy, producing extraordinarily costly misadventures like the Iraq War, have never even been on the radar screen of grassroots neighborhood and congregational organizations. Of course, the Bush Administration's launching of the Iraq War was unsuccessfully challenged by the anti-war mobilizations of an alliance of progressive organizations.

Winning changes in the policies and practices of governments and corporations has been extraordinarily important for the people who have directly benefited. But the political and economic structures that produce and, much more significantly, reproduce those policies and practices, have remained effectively unchallenged and unchanged, leaving a vast population of urban citizens politically and economically dispossessed and defenseless. As one community organizer put it, "We're like a flea on an elephant."<sup>24</sup>

To our credit, raising the human condition has been part of the *methodology* of our social development practice, not only its ultimate goal; and the capacity of the citizenry to act in the political-economy is what we have mentored and realized throughout the process. But sustained development is not possible without large numbers of organized citizens *permanently* and *consistently* engaged in their own uplifting—which requires that they have institutionalized rights, roles, and resources to enable and sustain their action. Such social, political, and economic restructuring—the advent of *institutionalized* empowerment of the citizenry—neither leads nor follows social development but

reinforces it: there is potentially a continual mutual causation. The ongoing goal is permanent empowerment, the achievement of legally vested roles for every citizen to act in the collective self-governance, to attain a substantively improved allocation of the nation's resources, their costs and benefits.

### ***Strategic Questions & Vision***

A strategic vision for social development, one that holds practical promise to rebuild the cities and the prospects of those who live in them, cannot avoid three pivotal questions:

- How will the grassroots national federations *increase their organizing resources, especially funding and staff, five- to ten-fold in the coming decade?*
- How will the grassroots national federations *change the political and economic structures of urban areas to ensure permanent and pervasive citizen influence in decisions on government and corporate policy and practice?*
- How will the grassroots national federations *bring about massive, long-range, public and private investment in urban infrastructure and enterprise?*

Certainly these questions are not susceptible to simple, quick, or comfortable answers. But some preliminary proposals may be precursors to the strategies that emerge in the coming decades.

***Forming a congress of faith-based grassroots federations:*** In the last 30 years we have seen the far-reaching rise and impact of national faith-based grassroots federations (FGFs). Their continuously expanding role in the historic process of organizing grassroots citizen power may not be unlike the rise of industrial unions in the labor movement, representing a qualitative leap forward in building momentum. And the FGFs, mimicking the industrial unions, will make much greater headway against the obstacles they face—raising money, recruiting staff, or mobilizing their members—when they set aside their well-founded claims to unique innovations and accomplishments in favor of joining together in a congress of federations.

The challenge posed by the distance between neighborhood and congregational federations appears even more daunting than that which exists between the FGFs. Yet my own experience as a staff organizer with in both the ACORN and PICO networks suggests that they have more in common than might be imagined. Much of faith-based organizing was historically, and remains, rooted in geographic neighborhoods; much of neighborhood organizing was historically, and remains, closely tied to faith-based institutions.

Organizers commonly understand the need for “cross-network collaboration. . . . which has been thwarted by historic rivalries and relative isolation of organizers within their networks.”<sup>25</sup> The networks are hamstrung by their own self-imposed commitment to be independent (read: divided) and thus “conquered,” insofar as they are consigned to remain relatively minor players. As independent networks, they remain inconspicuous and inconsequential in the country's political

decision-making, from county and regional councils to state and national legislatures and their corresponding executive offices. If they combine their strategic assets in large-scale strategies, campaigns, and actions, they can undoubtedly achieve a critical mass of organized faith-based power, which would dramatically increase their visibility, their wherewithal to recruit institutional members and organize neighborhoods, and their influence on all levels of political and economic decision-making.

Like all negotiated conflict resolution, the end of disabling contention between the FGFs and between them and the neighborhood federations is not a guarantee of permanent cooperation between them. Perhaps, however, it can make possible the beginning of their self-interested coordination of strategies and tactics in campaigns and actions, ending their isolation without compromising their independence, and markedly increasing their ability to transform urban life.

***Building an alliance of FGFs and Internet mobilization organizations:*** Working in tandem, the FGFs have the potential to take the first step that will bring about a qualitative increase in grassroots power by building alliances with the newly developed Internet-based political mobilization organizations, such as TrueMajority, MoveOn, and ActForChange.

The two distinctly different organizational wings of the twenty-first century grassroots movement have much to gain from a marriage of their complementary missions. Each can give the other what it lacks: the Internet organizations need well-organized, mobilized members that act in-person, which the FGFs have; the FGFs need a capacity for rapid-response mobilizations, which the Internet organizations have—and their combined potential would be remarkably greater than what they have individually.

No one should have any illusions, however, about the challenges entailed in any effort to integrate the missions of FGFs and Internet mobilization organizations. Although both lay claim to a populist democratic heritage, the guiding lights of both are mostly operating from the top down. The strategic managers of both the network organizations and the Internet mobilization organizations, while genuinely committed to serving the interests of their constituencies, mostly function independently. They each have a stake in maintaining their unique identity and *modus operandi*. Moreover, their issue and action arenas differ markedly—the FGFs operating for the most part locally and regionally and the Internet organizations nationally. Nonetheless, there is significant overlap of issues and potential targets of interest.

What might motivate the respective managers to work toward formal alliance and an integration of their missions? Possibly they will come to recognize that the citizenry they seek to organize has an historical memory of inflated rhetoric, unmet objectives for political and economic change, and unfulfilled visionary promises of community transformation. And as the primary organizational vehicles of a grassroots social movement, they have a limited historical window of

opportunity to increase markedly their momentum and their prospects for achieving measurable social development.

**Organizing nonpartisan, metropolitan political parties:** The emergence of PACs, multi-state primaries, partisan-sponsored pre-election polling, media-dominated campaigns, and self-promoting, often self-financed political personalities has consigned the national political parties mostly to backseat driving in nominations and elections, except possibly for their self-serving role in legislative gerrymandering. But, unfortunately, the monopolization of partisan politics by the Democratic and Republican parties, ensuring their own self-interest in electoral laws that guarantee two-way splits of public powers and in tax laws that maintain enormous disparities in wealth and income that benefit their sponsors, has nonetheless been the silent but poisonous dart to progressive independent candidates and third-party challenges.

The beginning of a structural response may lie in a new conception of nonpartisan, metropolitan political parties. The times and demographics call for nonpartisan political action in urban regions—organizations that are focused mainly on changes in the political and economic structures of cities and their suburban areas, specifically to bring them under permanent direct citizen control.

Considering an extension of their influence beyond the cities, no other national organizations are as well-placed and poised as the FGFs—with grassroots constituencies, institutional infrastructure, and action-oriented culture—to seed the organizational successors of the electorally moribund national partisan parties. The FGF's qualifications for sponsoring the formation of nonpartisan, metropolitan political party organizations include pluralistic faith-based motivation, a tradition of nonpartisanship, capacity for sustained organizing and mobilization, and citizen commitment and control.

**Implementing a strategy for acquiring public powers:** The FGFs can substantially leverage their power if, united together and with the neighborhood organizing federations, they move beyond influencing policy and practice to promoting structural change, including in their agenda the decentralization and grassroots acquisition of public powers, the powers exercised or influenced by those with whom we are continuously engaged in struggle.

Grassroots organizing has developed a knowledge base and practice competence in three of the four phases of social development: building community, building organization, and building mobilization. Still lacking, however, is a strategic vision for the ultimate phases of development—building and rebuilding movement and institutions. There is neither a grassroots vision nor a shared strategy to bring public powers under the direct control of the citizenry. Tim Sampson (d. 2001), a 30-year San Francisco State University teacher of community organizing, grassroots leader, and faculty-union organizer, and a visionary who had insight into the problem, once declared with his infectious humor,

“We’re in favor of public ownership—public ownership of the *government!*”

It's generally accepted that a feasible strategy for acquiring institutional powers should be incremental, moving from the municipal to the regional, statewide, and national arenas. But the FGFs have yet to conceptualize and implement an action strategy at the municipal level that would permanently vest rights, roles, and resources directly in the citizenry. Parenthetically, the sad but observable fact is that the ability to extend the reach of FGFs to regional and statewide arenas has often been based on an implicit “slash and burn” approach to allocating staff—launching projects, building congregational action-units, reassigning qualified staff to maintain expansion, and abandoning newly built units to long periods of inevitable inactivity on local issues. More discouraging has been the ability of well-financed reactionary, right-wing, and Republican forces to exert penetrating influence on the major media and Congress sufficient to bring ACORN, a 40-year-old organization with 30 state chapters, to the brink of bankruptcy.<sup>26</sup>

America's late nineteenth and early twentieth century urban political disempowerment for the sake of marshaling centralized bureaucratic polities was bankrolled by well-known industrial capitalists. They knew that their covertly sponsored big-city political machines could no longer deal with the increasingly raucous demands of a mushrooming class of urban industrial workers. So millions of Americans continue to suffer the onerous consequences of their “municipal reform” movement<sup>27</sup>—the nightmare of bureaucratized political rule. And unfortunately, community organizing has yet to recognize that there is a history, tradition, and multiplicity of legal avenues in the states to acquire public powers at the grassroots and thereby to radically transform the governance of big cities. One possible public powers strategy is described in my paper, “It's the *Public Powers, Stupid!*”<sup>28</sup>

**Investing in decentralized grassroots public enterprise:** The FGFs may contribute materially to the sorely needed economic renewal of urban areas if they become promoters of bootstrapped grassroots investment and control of decentralized public enterprise, a goal that would be much more achievable with directly democratic control of public powers, such as the sale of tax-free bonds, eminent domain, law-making, etc.

Long-term productivity of a mature capitalist political-economy that serves social development requires less dependence on capital-intensive, socially wasteful industries. Their great demands for capital, energy, and materials tend to restrict the benefits of ownership and control to a small minority, strain the state's fiscal capacity to the breaking point, generate unmanageable wastes and social pathologies, and leave idle huge reservoirs of labor. The alternative is for the public to reap some of the benefits of its investment in social infrastructure by engaging directly in less-capital-intensive, decentralized enterprise.

Nothing in the U.S. Constitution prohibits the states from exercising proprietary rights of enterprise;

historically several have done so, North Dakota most notably with state banks. The states may grant these proprietary rights as public powers to local organizations, either by chartering, legislative enactment, initiative, or constitutional amendment.

There are unlimited opportunities for small-scale, publicly sponsored enterprise, offering practical routes toward economic decentralization of the political-economy. More than 2,000 cities own utility companies. Local governments run printing plants, telephone systems, public baths, laundries, theaters, and markets. One city owns a basketball team, and many others own cable TV systems.

Numerous intermediate, small-scale manufacturing technologies have been well tested over decades of international development initiatives. They offer means to create potentially productive and profitable decentralized enterprise.<sup>29</sup> And given the absence of any economic law that predicts a better capital-to-output ratio by concentrating capital at fewer sites, there is also a promise of greater total economic productivity.

Supported with technical assistance from allied professionals, local units of the FGFs are ideally situated to introduce new openings for small-scale, publicly sponsored enterprise that is directly democratically controlled, offering practical routes to reinvigorate local economic activity.

**Founding a school of faith-based community organizing:** Lead organizers and project directors who have grappled with the practicalities of fundraising for community organizing and with recruitment of community organizers understand the demands they make on time, energy, and spirit. Yet it may *not* be reasonable to conclude that the sole or even primary cause of too few qualified applicants for organizer training and jobs is the lack of funding for salaries and benefits.<sup>30</sup>

College graduates who are considering career choices certainly place a high priority on potential earnings and financial security. But it's equally true that choosing a profession is connected to one's estimate of the challenges and potential fulfillment it offers, and the availability of advanced education and training to meet those challenges.

The inability of the FGFs to attract several thousand candidates to lifetime careers in the profession is inevitably influenced by the ironic lack of professional education and recognition associated with community organizing. The FGFs have recruited hundreds of organizers when they need to recruit thousands. Most have university degrees; many have graduate credentials and professional experience. They were hired with the expectation that they would work with professional autonomy and competence in settings and situations ranging from relationship-building with diverse constituencies and institutions to organizing political power gauged to challenge governments and corporations.

Arguably, given these rigorous requirements, it is reasonable to conclude that the lack of professional education for lifelong careers in faith-based community organizing materially affects recruitment of staff.

We have many anecdotal indications that fundraising for community organizing has been limited to some extent by perceptions that are widespread among main-line foundation directors, managers, and staff. They commonly view our activity as grassroots amateurism and idealism; that is, well-meaning but feeble attempts to solve large and complex social problems—which rings true in the light of our nation's chronic public education, employment, and housing problems. That individuals can be prepared to work as faith-based community organizers with one or two weeks of classroom training, followed by on-the-job training—without the rigorous reading, research, conceptual analysis, and writing requirements of professional education—is not likely to promote the confidence of major foundations in our long-term prospects for success.

The lack of professional education links staff recruitment and fundraising: if we get a large number of highly qualified candidates pursuing careers as organizers, we are likely to discover that the conditions which produce them also create access to more funding; and, of course, if we get more funding, we are likely to find that we want more highly qualified organizers.

The presence of a professional school of faith-based community organizing, supported and directed by, and dedicated to enhance the work of, faith-based grassroots federations (via directors who are *ex officio* designees of the federations), would begin to address the profession's educational deficit.

### ***Moving Beyond . . .***

It's regrettable that, notwithstanding the growth and increasing power of grassroots organizations through their national federations, especially in the past decade, their overall influence has been disappointing. To accept the validity of that conclusion, we need only consider the successes of the institutional forces that suppress social development, mainly through overwhelming control of Congress and elected state offices.

Here's the question we should be asking ourselves: How are we going to move beyond the excruciating consequences of reactionary politics, the self-congratulatory rhetoric of grassroots organizing, and the discouragement that follows our winning of victories without securing lasting social development?

The answer: Only a faith-based, grassroots, strategic vision—driving a unified, well organized movement dedicated to transforming the country's urban political and economic structures—offers fungible hope of materially improving the prospects of millions of people who have lost all hope.

\* Moshe ben Asher, formerly a community organizer for ACORN, PICO, and OTC, is co-director of Gather the People, a web-based nonprofit organization that provides education and training resources for congregational community organizing and development at <http://www.gatherthepeople.org>.

<sup>1</sup> *New York Times* (July 7, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> See Diana Jean Schemo, "Questions on Data Cloud Luster of Houston Schools," *New York Times* (July 11, 2003). See also, Schemo, "For Houston Schools, College Claims Exceed Reality," *New York Times* (August 28, 2003) and "Houston Punishes Former Principal in Undercount of Dropouts," *New York Times* (August 30, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> The author quotes "education experts" for the estimate of 40 percent. The Manhattan Institute, however, ranked Houston as having one of the lowest graduation rates at 52 percent. See Schemo, "Education Secretary Defends School System He Once Led," *New York Times* (July 26, 2003). See also, Schemo, "State to Monitor Houston Schools to Ensure Reporting of Dropouts" *New York Times* (August 8, 2003), in which the author reports: "An ensuing state audit of 16 Houston schools found that some 3,000 of 5,500 students who left school in the 2000-2001 school year, or 54 percent, should have been reported as dropouts, but were not. That year, the 212,000-student Houston system reported a dropout rate of 1.5 percent."

<sup>4</sup> Editorial, "Houston's School Dropout Debacle," *New York Times* (July 21, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> See Tamar Lewin and Jennifer Medina, "To Cut Failure Rate, Schools Shed Students," *New York Times* (July 21, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> See Richard Fossey, "Kidding Ourselves About School Dropout Rates," *Harvard Education Letter, Research Online* (May/June 1996) [<http://www.edletter.org/past/issues/1996-mj/dropout.shtml>]. See also, Michael Winerip, "The 'Zero Dropout' Miracle: Alas! Alack! A Texas Tall Tale," *New York Times* (August 13, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Jessica Portner, "Report Claims Guns More Plentiful at Schools," *Education Week* (September 27, 2000). See also Lisa Applegate, "School Review: No Intentional Underreporting," *The Roanoke Times* (August 13, 2003); Sam Dillon, "School Violence Data Under A Cloud in Houston," *New York Times* (November 7, 2003); and Julian Walker, "School Security Target of Report from Consultant," *Northeast Times* (August 30, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> School Reform Commission, *Public Safety/School Climate Summary, September 2002-June 2003* (The School District of Philadelphia, PA, August 21, 2003), p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> See Donald McLaughlin and Gili Drori, *School-Level Correlates of Academic Achievement, Student Assessment Scores in SASS Public Schools*, Research and Development Report, National Center for Education Statistics (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Education Research and Improvement, NCES 2000-303, May 2000), p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> Regarding the depth and breadth of the Baltimore district's problems and some of their underlying causes, see National Center for Schools and Communities—Graduate Schools of Education and Social Services—Fordham University, "Baltimore City Schools—2001-2002—A Failing System Riddled With Inequities" (February 2003) [<http://www.acorn.org/acorn10/betterschools/BetterSchoolsReports/Baltimore01-02NCSC.pdf>] and Erik Larson, "Where Does the Money Go," *Time* (October 27, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> The interviews revealed several common characteristics of their students' lives: alcohol- and drug-related birth defects; alcohol and drug use; pregnancy and teen-parenting; sexually transmitted diseases; peers who ridicule good study habits and scholarship; involvement in the criminal justice system (arrest, trial, probation, incarceration, etc.); exposure to frequent neighborhood gunfire and violence; violent deaths of relatives, friends, and acquaintances; malnutrition; sleep-deprivation; parenting by single parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents under severe financial pressure; unemployed and under-employed parents; parents and guardians often holding two or three jobs and too overwhelmed to provide parenting; little or no home-based support by a parent or other responsible adult for academic initiative; parents indifferent or apathetic about child-rearing; no after-school supervision; chaotic home life with alcoholic and drug-addicted parents; exploitation by parents for drug dealing; and transient families, moving from place to place for temporary employment.

<sup>12</sup> Such urban centers are so numerous, their description as "rust-belt" cities has become a cliché, a subject for social-commentary comic strips. See Harvey Pekar and Bill Griffith, "No, the River Didn't Catch Fire Again" *New York Times* (August 29, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Baltimore has experienced a 66 percent decline in manufacturing jobs since 1950. See James R. Cohen, "Abandoned Housing: Exploring Lessons from Baltimore," *Housing Policy Debate*, 12(3):415-448 (2001), p. 419 [[http://www.fanniemaefoundation.org/programs/hpd/pdf/HPD\\_1203\\_cohen.pdf](http://www.fanniemaefoundation.org/programs/hpd/pdf/HPD_1203_cohen.pdf)].

<sup>14</sup> For example, Cohen states that, "The City's Department of Housing and community Development (DHCD), along with several community-based organizations, is resigned to the fact that a large portion of vacant, dilapidated [housing] units will never be rehabilitated and occupied" (p. 415).

<sup>15</sup> For numerous examples, see "Enough to Make You Sick," *New York Times* (October 12, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> A policy paper by New York's broadly based Housing First! organization notes, "The pressure for increased housing production, and for more affordable housing, comes at a time when all three levels of government—local, state and federal—have dramatically scaled back investment in housing construction. The budget of the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) plunged from more than \$50 billion in 1980 (\$104.5 billion in today's dollars) to only \$21.2 billion in 2000. This year's proposed HUD budget maintains current spending levels, representing an effective reduction when adjusted for inflation." See "Building for the Future: New York's Affordable Housing Challenge" [<http://www.housingfirst.net/policypaper2.html>]. More than 100,000 federally subsidized units have been converted to market-rate housing in the past three years. Nationwide, over 12.5 million persons, one-third of them children, live in households with "worst-case" housing needs. In the past two years, nearly 1.5 million affordable housing units have been lost nationwide. These include unsubsidized units where rents have increased, privately owned housing where owners have opted out of federal subsidy programs, and public housing that has been demolished but not replaced. See Megan Sandel et al., *There's No Place Like Home: How America's Housing Crisis Threatens Our Children* (San Francisco: Housing America, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> Examples include the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, National People's Action, Community Action, hundreds of community development corporations, and thousands of independent neighborhood organizing projects.

<sup>18</sup> Affiliated with the Gamaliel Foundation

<sup>19</sup> See the Executive Summary in Mark R. Warren and Richard L. Wood, “Faith-Based Community Organizing: The State of the Field,” [http://comm-org.utoledo.edu/papers2001/faith/contents.htm, January 2001].

<sup>20</sup> The major players include the Industrial Areas Foundation, the Pacific Institute for Community Organization, the Gamaliel Foundation, and the Direct Action and Research Training Center.

<sup>21</sup> In Susannah Heschel (ed.), “On Prayer,” *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays by Abraham Joshua Heschel* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997), p. 262.

<sup>22</sup> See Michael Silver [NKA Moshe ben Asher], “You Too Can Organize a Government,” *The Organizer* (Summer 1981).

<sup>23</sup> Notwithstanding that faith-based community organizations have played a role in resource allocations, setting issues and agendas in the process, they have not effected a “reconceptualization” of resource allocation within their communities. See Jeanne Appleman, “Evaluation Study of Institution-Based Organizing for the Discount foundation” (November 12, 1996) [http://comm-org.utoledo.edu/papers97/appleman.htm].

<sup>24</sup> See Strategic Self-Assessment in Warren and Wood.

<sup>25</sup> See Collaborative Work Beyond the Local Organization in Warren and Wood.

<sup>26</sup> See Ian Urbina, “Acorn on the Brink of Bankruptcy, Officials Say,” *New York Times* (March 19, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> For a case study that casts municipal reform in a positive light, see Jane S. Dahlberg, *The New York Bureau of Municipal Research* (New York: New York University Press, 1966).

<sup>28</sup> Available online at http://www.gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/SECESSION.pdf. Originally titled “Secession is *Not* the Solution” and posted on COMM-ORG at http://comm-org.utoledo.edu/papers2002/benashergov.htm.

<sup>29</sup> For one of many promising approaches, see Hubert Schmitz, “Collective Efficiency: Growth Path for Small-Scale Industry,” *Journal of Development Studies*, 31(4):529-38 (April 1995).

<sup>30</sup> Warren and Wood state that, “One of the critical challenges facing the field is securing an adequate financial base to support its work, to pay for salaries of professional organizers, basic organizational overhead, and costs for extended training for leaders.”

**Click [here](#) for more Torah-based community organizing and development tools.**

**Help support the work of Gather the People with a tax-deductible donation by clicking [here!](#)**

© 2010-2024 Moshe ben Asher & Khulda bat Sarah