



WHAT WE CAN EXPECT FROM A COMMUNITY ORGANIZER PRESIDENT

BY JONAH PESNER

Shortly before he began his presidential campaign, Senator Barack Obama sat down for most of an afternoon with Mark Pelavin (associate director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism) and me. We were struck by his probing questions and the fact that he had studied our Just Congregations website. The senator wanted to know not just about our mission and goals, but also about me. Why did I believe in the work I was doing?

I believe that Obama's inquisitiveness is directly related to his experience as a community organizer. Among the most critical qualities of an effective organizer is an authentic curiosity about others. Obama learned in organizing training that to be powerful in public life, a leader needs a strong, vast network of followers, and people only follow a leader if he or she understands them—their values, concerns, interests, and motivations. (Notably, I received my own training as a community organizer from the same group that trained Obama: the Industrial Areas Foundation, founded by the late Saul Alinsky. In fact, Obama and I were both trained by the same organizer, Arnie Graf, who now mentors me in my role as the Union's director of Just Congregations.)

What will it mean to have a community organizer serve as president of the United States? The answer has significant implications about the way President Obama will govern; about his ability to have an impact in Washington and,

Rabbi Jonah Pesner is the founding director of the Union's Just Congregations program.

more broadly, about what organizing can teach us about being effective forces for social justice.

To understand how Obama leads, look at the way he ran his campaign. It was rooted in the core organizing principle that the power to make real change comes from people acting together. Campaign field organizers reached out to thousands of volunteers and treated them like leaders. Rather than assign them tasks, like phone calls and leafleting, they trained them to recruit friends, family, and neighbors. Volunteers were given training and support, and then allowed the freedom to develop their own strategy to get voters to commit to supporting Obama. In this way, the campaign built a grassroots movement. They trained leaders who recruited new people, identified new leaders, and spread the campaign across the country, neighborhood by neighborhood. An army of local volunteer leaders hosted house parties, campaign events, and Internet-based activities—which led to fundraisers that made Obama's television advertisement possible.

Understanding the importance of empowering an organized, energized broad constituency to fight for change, Obama will likely take on reforming health care, addressing the economic crisis, and shifting course in foreign policy in the same way. An apt anecdote: After a White House meeting with advocates, President Franklin Roosevelt once said, "OK, you've convinced me. Now go on out and bring pressure on me!" All U.S. presidents depend on organized people to apply enough pressure to overcome resistant forces. For

President Obama to pass large-scale health reform, his administration will have to organize the American people to pressure Congress and fight back special interests and resistant forces.

The Obama presidency thus creates an enormous opportunity for us—an organized constituency of more than a million people with a shared set of Jewish values. With an administration in power that keenly understands the need for organized constituencies to support its agenda, we are challenged in turn to organize around issues of social and economic justice. Just as Obama volunteers became leaders who built his base of constituents, member congregations can become networks of leaders, organizing local Jewish communities to advocate on behalf of the issues that reflect our most deeply held Jewish values.

As part of our training as community organizers, both President Obama and I learned the language of the "transformation of the world as it is into the world as it should be." "Hope," he proclaimed last fall, "is the bedrock of this nation. The belief that our destiny will not be written for us, but by us, by all those men and women who are not content to settle for the world as it is, who have the courage to remake the world as it should be." This fundamental idea is also in our Just Congregations' mission statement: "Our purpose is redemption: the sacred transformation of the world as it is—parched by oppression—into the world as we know it should be—overflowing with justice." We need look no further than ourselves to find the leadership to transform the world. That's where the power lies. □