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Stephen A. Cozen: Jewish Destiny's in Jewish Hands

March 06, 2008

Lynn B. Edelman
Jewish Federation Feature

During his 1978 trip to Israel as a participant on the Federation's President's Mission, Steve and Sandy Cozen heard a short story that spoke volumes about Jewish commitment. Their guide took the group to Mount Herzl in Jerusalem for a tour of the military cemetery. Near the tomb of Theodor Herzl, founder of the political Zionist movement, they stopped at the grave of Zalman Pipschuk and learned of his tremendous bravery.



Stephen A. Cozen

"During the War of Independence, this young man single-handedly defended one of the seven hills of Jerusalem. He became commander of that hill when all of the other men died before his eyes. Ultimately, Pipschuk, too, would die in this six-hour stand-off with enemy forces, yet the hill remained secure," said Cozen, adding that "when the reserves finally arrived to relieve the fallen soldiers, they were amazed by the fortitude of the young commander who was only 13 years old!"

Pipschuk's willingness to sacrifice his life to secure the existence of a Jewish homeland deepened Cozen's sense of commitment to the Jewish community. "There and then I realized that it was up to each and every one of us to preserve and protect all the great things about Judaism and our Jewish people," he said. "Sandy and I concluded that whatever we did would never be enough."

The 1978 trip to the Jewish state was the first of many for Cozen, the founder and chairman of the Philadelphia-based international law firm of Cozen O'Connor. His love for Israel is reflected in two tablets from the Kotel, the Western Wall, that adorn the wall above his desk, and a prized photo of the historic signing of the Oslo peace accords between former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and then PLO head Yasser Arafat given to him by former President Bill Clinton.

While Israel has a special place in Cozen's heart, numerous other causes and concerns inspire his leadership and philanthropy. Chief among them is the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia, with which he has been involved for more than 35 years. "I have always believed that there is a need for a centralized Jewish organization to provide fundraising and to serve as a meaningful coalition between the religious efforts of our rabbis and synagogues, and the ecumenical efforts of the Jewish people who live in this region," he said, adding "then and now, Federation has tried to meet this need."

Albeit, sometimes more successfully than others, he acknowledged. "Through the years, our Jewish community has been impacted by assimilation and diversification of charitable interests," he explained, adding that "Federation experienced a deterioration in the intensity of both leadership and philanthropic support as it became diffused in its focus."

He has watched with satisfaction as Federation began the complex process of transformation. "Federation, over the past 12 to 18 months, has evolved from its former

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role as the quintessential epicenter of Jewish life in Greater Philadelphia to its important new function as a catalyst -- an organization that can make important things happen." It has refocused on a project-oriented approach addressing priorities.

Cozen congratulates Federation President Ira M. Schwartz for doing the necessary legwork to prepare for this transformation -- trimming the organization's budget and staff, and convening a task force to come up with a more efficient business model. He also has high praise for board chair Leonard Barrack and campaign chair I Michael Coslov for their work to make Federation more donor-centric -- an organization that respects donors as individuals with unique resources and philanthropic desires, and operates in a manner that utilizes these resources effectively, efficiently and transparently.

Cozen believes that the secret to Federation's success in this new role is to concentrate its focus on three key projects -- support of Israel, Jewish education, and caring for our Jewish poor and elderly. He views Federation's local and global beneficiary agencies as "valued strategic partners" in delivering programs and services to Jews who fall within the framework of these three areas of interest.

While Federation is a principal focus of Cozen's philanthropy, he shares his time and resources with numerous other Jewish and non-Jewish organizations. He is a trustee of the National Museum of American Jewish History, and is excited by the opportunities that the new facility, slated to open in 2010, will provide to educate both Jews and non-Jews about how Jews utilized the gifts of religious freedom to make diverse contributions to American life. "Thanks to these special exhibitions and programs, future generations of Jews will have a better understanding about who they are and where they came from," he said.

Cozen himself is the product of his traditional Jewish upbringing. The grandson of Orthodox Jews, he learned early on to daven, and read Torah and Haftorah. "One of my greatest joys is to go to shul with my children and pray together during the High Holidays," he said.

Yet the native Philadelphian's happiest childhood memories involved shooting hoops with his father, Sam, a teacher and basketball coach at Overbrook High School. There, Cozen worked with one of the school's most celebrated alumni, Wilt Chamberlain.

To honor his father's memory, Cozen's firm sponsors the Samuel D. Cozen Police Athletic League, one of 27 PAL centers throughout Philadelphia that offers area children a broad range of free sporting, educational and recreational programs. He considers his most important commitment over the last 10 years to have been as a trustee and board member of Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation, now a part of University of Southern California as the Shoah Institute for Visual History. With the largest archive of Holocaust testimonies, the Shoah Foundation, is the world's repository of lessons to be learned about hatred, bigotry and the suffering they cause.

Cozen's Jewish values have influenced the way he conducts business in the firm he founded in 1970. Under his leadership, the firm has grown from its initial complement of four attorneys practicing in Philadelphia to 500 attorneys practicing in 21 national offices and two international offices in London, England, and Toronto, Canada. The firm's emphasis on community service and involvement is guided by Hillel's teachings from Pirke Avot 2:5 -- "Do not separate yourself from the community." Cozen O'Connor attorneys actively serve on numerous boards of directors, and are encouraged to assume leadership responsibilities in civic and social-service organizations, health and welfare organizations, youth groups, senior-citizen organizations, religious groups, colleges, universities and law schools, and the arts community.

Cozen O'Connor, through its Charitable Foundation, generously supports charities and nonprofit organizations in the communities in which they practice law. Among the many groups that benefit from the foundation are: American Red Cross; Big Brothers/Big Sisters and Boys and Girls Clubs; Catholic Charities; Habitat for Humanity; Jewish Family and Children's Service; the American Cancer Society; the American Heart Association; The Black United Fund; the National Adoption Center; the National Multiple Sclerosis Society; United Way; and Magee Rehabilitation Center.

It's been 30 years since Cozen first visited the Jewish homeland -- a trip so poignant that he documented it in a memoir he calls *This Year in Jerusalem: A Personal Experience*. Each time he looks through the book, he relives many memories. He recalls a conversation with Zane Shacham, a brigadier general who addressed mission participants. "Zane touched my heart with a new interpretation of the talmudic statement

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regarding the responsibility of every Jew for the other. He looks at it more as a guarantee than a responsibility,"explains Cozen.

He understands the general's emphasis that Jews have a sacred obligation to preserve, protect and defend the birthrights and the human rights of fellow Jews, wherever they live. It was also on that trip that he became friendly with Yoram "YaYa" Yair, later to become one of the top three people in the Israel Defense Force. The Cozen and Yair families have been close ever since, and Steve and YaYa work together on a variety of projects (business and otherwise) to this date. "Family is the most important thing in the world to me. My kids and seven grandchildren are steeped in Jewish tradition and education, but their spiritual leader is Bubbe Sandy, not Zaide Steve."

In his memoir, Cozen has internalized Zaneke's interpretation, and has embodied it in his work with Federation and other Jewish communal groups. "If we do not work on behalf of our fellow Jews, no one else will. And if we do not do it now, when will it be done? How many more will be sacrificed if we do notact?"

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