

Envisioning the World as it Should Be: Jewish Community Organizing Across Identities in Chicago

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"You should really read this article... I'll send it to you," Avra said. We were talking about the role gender plays in community organizing. In my time with the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs (JCUA), I had started to delve into my suspicion that women's labor is often invisible, especially their contributions to community organizing. The article that Avra suggested I read not only confirmed my theory but offered a new way of looking at organizing – one that eventually led me to rethink my ideas on the role of identity in the field.

I wasn't surprised that identity politics came up in my work doing community organizing with JCUA. But the role my own identity played this past summer, while I was working on a campaign to improve police accountability and the relationship between law enforcement and communities of color in Chicago, felt more complicated than ever. I had always professed Jews' responsibility to help liberate oppressed peoples; we are all too familiar with being persecuted on the basis of our identity. On the other hand, as a white person with a heck of a lot of privilege, I know that representing my identity as also part of a persecuted group was going to be a challenge.

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Rewind to my first day with JCUA: Monday, June 5th. My supervisor wanted me to go to Midwest Academy's community organizing training – really, a dream of mine. Midwest Academy's summer program trains a cohort of community organizing interns from a number of different placements across Chicago. Last year, I got to meet Heather Booth, the founder of Midwest Academy, at J Street U's Summer Leadership Institute. I was wide-eyed in that session with Booth: a prophet in the world of community organizing, who had herself learned from the esteemed Saul Alinsky, then broke off from his teachings and creating her own structure for community organizing – one that relied on women, instead of only men, as change-makers. SWOON.

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I first started to get involved with community organizing when I joined J Street U, the student movement working to end the occupation of the West Bank and bring about a two-state solution in Israel and Palestine. As soon as I set foot on Brandeis' campus, I knew J Street U was my political home. As I got more and more involved in J Street U, I realized there were a number of reasons I was there. The students were probably the sharpest group I had ever met. They thought so deeply and intentionally about how to take action and agitate to move the American Jewish establishment toward acting against the occupation of the West Bank, in ways I had never even considered. Though I was somewhat intimidated, I was also enticed by the sense of power and agency these students had. And damn, were they passionate about this. As college progressed, the students in J Street U became my community.

The deep sense of responsibility for the oppression of Palestinians at the hands of the Jewish state that drove me to join J Street U had begun before I came to Brandeis. I had spent the summer before my first year of college working at an integrated Arab-Jewish day school. About a week after I arrived in Jerusalem, the three yeshiva boys who were kidnapped by Hamas were found dead. And so ensued the 2014 Gaza War. Bomb shelter drills.... Actual hiding in bomb shelters as missiles were detected.... Sometimes my Arab campers didn't come to class because



Photo: Emma Drongowski

Leading a phone bank to sustain and build JCUA's base and membership.

there were Israeli Defense Forces soldiers standing by their bus stop, viewing them as a safety risk. Later in the summer, my Arab campers would come to class and with sweaty palms and red cheeks, report on their families in Gaza, hiding from rockets without access to bomb shelters. One day we learned that a student, Karim, lost a cousin in Gaza. Looking back at a journal entry from that summer, I am reminded of how deeply the Gaza War of 2014 affected me.

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How can the rest of the world be so normal at a time like this? I texted my mom last night that I felt immobilized. I was up past 1 am, and I couldn't stop crying about the situation here. I am very safe, but I am scared. I am scared of what my people are doing to innocent people. My mom tells me that

Gazan people are not going into shelters and Israel is retaliating. If Israel doesn't, then other tragedies may happen. The country is constantly threatened. Hamas does not want two states – they want to wipe out Israel... This, I understand. I also understand that the people of Gaza are being told they will be martyrs if they use themselves as human shields. But still, how is it right for Israel to kill so many innocent civilians? I feel as though this is becoming a humanitarian issue just as much as it is a political issue. I am working at a coexistence camp this summer, but right now, coexistence seems impossible. It seems as though Hamas is lighting a match and throwing it at Israel while Israel is throwing a blowtorch at Gaza. Israel can protect the Hamas fire from spreading because they can put out the match. The only defense Gaza has is its people, human shields. But if there

are human shields there, then why is Israel deliberately continuing the operation and subsequently killing these people? Last night, while I was soundly sleeping in my apartment in Jerusalem, there was the most destruction to Gaza and its people since the beginning of the Six Day War. I'm told Hamas is a terrorist organization, but the only place receiving terror right now is Gaza, and it's from the IDF. I want to support Israel. I want to understand their reasoning. But I can't comprehend it. Last night was the first time I felt ashamed to be a Jew. Maybe I am totally misinformed... I hope so.

That summer was when I learned that Israel was not the "light unto the nations" I was raised believing it was. Considering Jews' history of oppression and persecution on the basis of their identity, I had always expected that Israel would represent the best version of democracy and equality. But my ideas could not be any further from the truth.

That summer was the first time I felt ashamed of the Jewish people because of the oppression the Jewish state brought to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. My pain and sense of betrayal became a hot and fiery anger that launched me toward never looking away from this terrible conflict. It became clear to me that Jews have to take action to oppose the oppressiveness of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict not only for Palestinians but for Israelis as well. The realities of the conflict led me to focus on working to make the Jewish people the best that we could be.

My sense of disillusionment around Israel's oppression of Palestinian people awoke in me a larger awareness of marginalized people's struggles, and especially of where traditional American Jewish leadership stood on them. As I became more and more critical of my community's politics on Israel, I also started to notice the gaps between American Jewish leadership's values and actions when it came to racial justice.

In August 2017, the Boston Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC), the organization that “define[s] and advance[s] the values, interests and priorities of the organized Jewish community of Greater Boston...”, released a statement withholding their support from the Movement for Black Lives (MBL) due to the assertion in MBL’s platform that Israel is perpetrating a genocide against Palestinians. MBL’s language stung. Making this claim with the language of genocide cannot help but negatively provoke and upset Jews and the Jewish state by reminding us of our collective trauma during the Holocaust. And references to Israel as the face of global imperialism are usually laced with anti-Semitic tropes. But I was still embarrassed. I stood with Black lives (is that even a question?), and I couldn’t look away from supporting the strongest civil rights movement of my time. I resented the Boston JCRC for forcing Boston Jews to choose between our commitment to racial justice in America and our Jewish commitments. My #BlackLivesMatter tweets and attendance at Black Lives Matter rallies in Boston weren’t enough. Where were the white Jews taking action for racial justice? What about Jews of color? Where were the Jews putting into action the values of loving the stranger and releasing from their oppression the present-day slaves of Egypt? Why did I feel so alone?

Time and again I felt attacked by the ways that American Jewish communal institutions, who claimed to represent me and the rest of my community, took control of deciding what it means to be Jewish politically. I had enough of these institutions’ silencing determination of Jewish values for my generation and for me. Just like American Jewish institutions’ choice to be complicit in the occupation of the West Bank and the oppression of Palestinians, they also became complicit in the over-policing of Black bodies, some of whom were Jewish themselves. I was angry. It was time for me to take the same energy

and determination I had been directing toward the American Jewish community’s contribution to the occupation and apply it to the American Jewish community’s complicity in police brutality and the oppression of Black folks in the US. This is what brought me to work with the JCUA.

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It’s my final day at the Midwest Academy organizer training, and I scan over the strategy chart my supervisor has provided me. So I’m to develop 6-8 leaders this summer...not sure that’s going to happen. “25 new members, 50 membership renewals, 1-2 info sessions.” Eight weeks. No pressure. Apparently my supervisor wanted to set the goals so I could “shoot for the moon and land amongst the stars,” one might say – though personally, I’d rather just shoot for the stars and reach them. Come on – who wants to reach half the goals they set out for themselves? If you ask me, that’s a sure way to make someone feel like a failure.

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Photo: Hannah Arwe

Coordinating the canvassing of a train station to bring Chicago residents to call on their aldermen to pass an ordinance that embraces an ethical police contract.

However...I really can't wait to roll up my sleeves and get to work. Coming from spending a semester studying abroad can make you feel like all you're doing is taking from the world and not doing anything for anyone else around you. JCUA, "the Jewish voice for social justice in Chicago," is about to unleash its racial justice campaign, and I am giddy with joy to be able to finally put my values into action. JCUA's police accountability campaign is largely concerned with bringing about a new police contract that holds police officers accountable. After having organized around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with J Street U, I am really looking forward to doing organizing on a local level.

JCUA is working with the Coalition for Police Contract Accountability (CPCA) to secure changes in the Chicago police union contract negotiations. Currently, their contracts make it too hard to identify police misconduct and too easy for officers to lie about misconduct, and require officials to destroy evidence, making police brutality too hard to investigate. It was in the context of these

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troubling contract clauses that the police officer who murdered Laquan McDonald had avoided any responsibility or punishment.

On October 20, 2014, Chicago police officer Jason Van Dyke shot Laquan McDonald, a Black teenager struggling with mental illness. While those who are arrested for homicide are usually immediately questioned, under his union contract, Officer Van Dyke was given 24 hours to come up with a story about the death of Laquan McDonald. A year later, once the evidence came out that Van Dyke shot McDonald 16 times, he was given yet another opportunity to change his story – all in accord with the police union contract. The story of Laquan McDonald and numerous other Black Chicagoans being abused or worse by police officers has made it clear that the Chicago Police Department needs to be held responsible for the unequal and brutal treatment of Black people when it comes to police brutality.

In working with the Coalition for Police Contract Accountability, JCUA is trying to get Chicago aldermen to refuse a new contract that does not incorporate 14 changes they have recommended. In working to support these coalitions, I'm aiming to work with six to eight JCUA members toward taking active leadership in the organization. I am specifically focusing my energy on developing these leaders who live in the three wards in which JCUA has committed to building support. The goal is for the residents in those three wards to put pressure on their aldermen to refuse any police union contract that does not include CPCA's recommendations.

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starting to really live out the community organizer persona – overworked and underpaid. I'm tired from the hours I've been working but also exhausted by the questions I've been asking myself.

I've been thinking a lot lately about the roles race and gender play in organizing. This past weekend, I helped facilitate a training that Midwest Academy ran at the United State of Women's Galvanize Summit in Chicago. Sponsored by the Obama and Biden Foundations, the conference aimed to activate the seeds planted at the Women's March.

There were several tracks this weekend, one of which was a community-organizing track that Midwest Academy led. Each of the Midwest Academy interns were there to help facilitate the training, which basically entailed passing out papers, answering questions, and checking in on each group to make sure they were understanding the exercises properly.

I lifted up the black plastic lever, and hot liquid splashed out into my paper cup. As I was adjusting the lid on my coffee cup, I saw Kweli standing next to me, sliding her coffee into one of those brown paper sleeves. "Hey Leah, Judy and I decided to make you the lead facilitator this weekend, which really just entails you making sure that things are running smoothly with the other facilitators, that they're passing out all the materials and checking in with the tables that need help. Sound good?"

I was so flattered – until I became the superior to the other interns who are usually my peers. I felt even more uncomfortable as one of the only white interns in the cohort, managing the other interns who were mostly people of color.

"Hey Keesha, how 'bout you check in with that table over there, I know they had some trouble understanding the last concept."

“Jamie, I think we need more hands on those two tables.”

By the end of the third session, some of the interns were sitting at the back table, their faces illuminated by the blue lights coming from their phone screens, their pointer fingers scrolling, scrolling, scrolling. “I just wanna go to bed,” Keesha announced, slumping into her hand resting on the table. Jamie leaned back into their chair and put their right hand over their eyes. “You’re so funny, Keesha,” they said, shaking their head between laughs.

We still had another session left, but I decided it would be better if I just didn’t say anything to Jamie, Keesha, and the other interns who wanted to be done for the day. It didn’t feel right to be on their cases, for two reasons. The first one was that we’re normally equals, and since it’s not really my place to ask them to pull their weight most days, it felt uncomfortable to create that dynamic today, at least for the sake of our relationships during the rest of the time we’re training together. The second reason, but the louder one in my ears, was that maybe the other interns with less structural privilege than I have thought that I had no role doing social justice work as a white woman from the Northshore suburbs.

Earlier in the day, Jamie had been talking about reparations. It felt pretty backwards for me to be the “supervisor” of people of color, asking them to complete more work and labor. I decided to just carry out their roles myself. Although I was doing about three times the work I should have been doing, I’d rather be overworked than handle this strange power dynamic.

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I need to better figure out how to navigate power dynamics when it comes to race and community organizing. I know this is not the last time I will be working with



Photo: Leah Susman

United State of Women: Galvanize Chicago Summit. Through Midwest Academy, Leah facilitated this community organizing training for 100 women.

people of color, and this may not be the last time I will be a supervisor of people of color. Race-based power dynamics are also at the forefront of JCUA’s thinking. In my time here, I’ve learned that when JCUA is working on a campaign related to lifting up communities of color, they will not run their own campaign, but instead will work with a coalition of groups for and led by people of color. That’s what we’re doing with the police accountability campaign, and it feels important to me that we leave the goals of our campaigns in the hands of those who are most affected by them.

Working in a coalition is not something I have experienced in the past, but the coalition model that JCUA has adopted means that they accept a kind of supervision by people of color. Having built my organizing resume through my work with J Street U, we have always led our own campaigns, working to end the occupation and bring about a two-state solution in Israel and Palestine. Though J Street U is comprised mainly of American Jewish students, determining Israel’s future and influencing the way they treat Palestinians feels as much of a Jewish issue as it is an

Israeli issue. In working with J Street U, I’ve been able to strategize around influencing the American Jewish community and American politics, and take the lead on our campaigns. Working in a coalition and having less agency and ownership over a campaign is definitely something to get used to. It’s not that I think white people are the right ones to lead a campaign that affects mainly people of color. Maybe I prefer to be with a community organizing group that is not answerable to anyone but ourselves, because of the sense of agency I have over making the transition from the world as it is to the world as it should be.

Navigating these types of identity politics definitely posed a challenge for the rest of the organizing team at JCUA too. We were presented with a really incredible opportunity to galvanize Chicago this summer. On June 30th, the unethical police union contracts were up, and our senior organizer had been planning how to launch the Chicago Jewish base for months, in preparation for some type of action aimed to turn out lots of people and raise the public profile of the moral dilemma posed by Chicago’s police union contract.

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What ended up happening is that the organizations that we were working with had some employment changes and some of their organizers were on vacation, so the plan to galvanize Chicago around police accountability fell through.

JCUA did not take over the organization of a march or other large event. Had we done this, we would have sent the message that people of color needed white people to liberate them from their oppression, rather than the idea that they have the power to liberate themselves. For that reason, the event would have been completely different, had it been perceived as a mainly white organization taking action on an issue that is not our own. Instead, the day of action took the shape of a press conference and canvassing. While both the press conference and canvassing were successful, they did not get nearly as much press, awareness, and attention as a mass action would have. But, maybe this is JCUA's unique contribution to the fight for racial justice and against police brutality – to make sure our own community is doing all that we can.

On a more personal note, a big part of what I love about community organizing is the ability to actualize my ideas and my values – to strategize. However, our role is not to lead the fight in overturning police brutality, but instead to carry out what those who are targeted by police brutality

ask of us. Something I struggle with is that I am not sure if working on campaigns that I cannot take strategic ownership of is the right move for me in the future. Part of what draws me to community organizing is the sense of empowerment I feel from being able to come up with solutions to problems. At times, bringing the Jewish community toward taking action does not feel like it is enough, if that is not what solves the problem. But feeling stifled by my structural position makes it hard for me to feel agency over the work.

But what is it about actualizing my ideas and values that is so important to me? Do I want to work on issues that do not directly affect me? Can I work effectively on those issues? Are my abilities better used on issues that do directly affect me?

I guess these are pretty much all questions about my self-interest, which in community organizing means my motivations for taking action. I think that my self-interest has shape-shifted over the years. Parts of it from when I was 18 are still present, and other parts, not so much. And I've developed new self-interests. When I left Jerusalem in the summer of 2014, my self-interest was based on my sense of guilt and responsibility for Jews' perpetration of oppression and occupation of Palestinians, and other Jews' silence about it. Out of all the human rights-based issues in the world, I chose to work on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict because of the feelings I harbored about Jews' place in it.

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Trump's election made me feel smaller and more powerless than I ever had. In the effort to regain that sense of lost power, I took action with J Street U. It may have not been the exact place I wanted to regain myself, but it was the place I knew how to build power, and the place where I knew that I could.

Ella, another student organizer, from Wesleyan, and I were hunting for the way to best galvanize the anger around Trump in the American Jewish community. On top of being a rapist, racist, and xenophobe, he also was the first president in decades to drop the two-state solution from his foreign policy platform. After weeks upon months of one-on-one organizing conversations and meetings, Ella and I finally got J Street U moving on launching a march at our national conference in February.

When more than 1,000 students marched to the White House, I felt strong again. J Street U is my team in forgetting the world as it is and creating the world as it should be.

The J Street U national board led the march, and many of them made speeches once we got to the White House. It was the same national board that did virtually no work to make the march happen, but Ella and I were too proud of the image of more than 1,000 angry students demanding a two-state solution and an end to the occupation for us to comment on it at the time.

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This past summer, I was happy to work with Avra, who had joined the staff as a community organizer about a month and half before I began. Avra had short, cropped hair and wore glasses. She was much better at navigating the "radical Jewish feminist" vibe in the workplace than I was – slacks and natural armpits compared to my colorful dress and shaved armpits. Avra came into JCUA at just the right time – right as the police accountability work started to hit the ground. Our community organizer, Danny, who had been around since the beginning of JCUA's organizing work, would leave just a few months after she started – just the right amount of time to show her the ropes.

I loved Avra's ideas. She wanted to build JCUA into a social justice home for Jewish Chicagoans – this type of community thrives in cities like New York and Boston but not yet in Chicago, and Avra was going to make it happen. She and I talked a lot about gender roles and the idea of “public and private” organizing – in which private relationships (code for “relationships where we talk about our feelings”) – are considered feminine and unprofessional.

In the community organizing that I had been involved with, the idea of public vs. private has played a large role in my organizing experience. Brian, the organizer who has developed me more than any other person in the organization, knows me on a very public or “professional” level. In our conversations, we try to stay away from everything private – anything that may distract from what we are trying to achieve. But I have found that this type of divide between public and private has made it challenging for Brian and me to understand each other as full people. It is likely part of the reason that Brian doesn't fully recognize the extent of the work that I put into our organizing. And it is also likely part of why I am unaware of where his struggles with organizing lie. Overall, it feels as though our organization is consumed by a culture where we only know half of each person we work with – the public or “professional” half.

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“You should really read this article... I'll send it to you,” Avra advised. The article ended up changing entirely the way I think about relationships in community organizing. Titled “Community Organizing or Organizing Community?” by Randy Stoecker and Susan Stall (1996), it helped me understand why community organizing as I knew it, which I associated with Saul Alinsky's methods, does not prioritize

community and personal relationships. In his book *Rules for Radicals*, Alinsky notes that community organizing is not a job for family or marital types, essentially asserting that it is not possible to be both a community organizer and also attend to a family. He refers to this balance in claiming, that “the tension, the hours, the home situation, and the opportunities, do not argue for fidelity.” From this, it is clear that Alinsky does not support putting women at the center of organizing, since women were generally responsible for raising children and being homemakers when *Rules for Radicals* was published in 1971. Further, Alinsky's model is one that focuses more on public sphere strategizing than on private sphere relationships to achieve change.

It has become clear to me that this decades-old tradition has affected my relationship to community organizing altogether. Stoecker and Stall's 1996 article helped me see the flipside of the practices to which I had been accustomed: “[U]nlike the Alinsky model, women-centered organizing involvement does not emanate from self-interest but from an ethic of care maintained by relationships...” Alinsky-style organizing places value on relationships in the context of how those relationships are strategic and can help us win public fights – how relationships can help us achieve our self-interest.

Understanding the roots behind the emphasis that femininity, synonymous with weakness, placed on personal relationships and feelings in community organizing has helped me better understand why my leadership is overlooked at times. And understanding what Stoecker and Stall define as women-centered organizing has helped me reassess the role that full and personal relationships play in community organizing as I plan to practice it.

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My journey in community organizing within the American Jewish community has been consistently shaped by questioning aspects of my identity: race, gender, religion, and politics. I have continued to reflect on my place as an agent of change in challenging race and gender-based power structures, in order to recreate a Jewish community that I want to be a part of. The world as it should be will only come through organizing a Jewish community that acts for justice and against oppression.



Photo: Emma Drongowski

Leah at a rally to make Chicago a sanctuary city, with fellow Midwest Academy summer internship cohort member, Raunel.