



# **Raised Voices and New Beginnings**

The Jewish Organizing Initiative  
2010 Year-End Report

**“Shout out loud!** Don’t hold back! Raise your voice like a shofar!” At the Jewish Organizing Initiative, we take these words from the prophet Isaiah to heart. Organizing is all about helping people to find and effectively exercise their voices, especially those who have been disenfranchised, marginalized or excluded from decision-making processes that affect their lives. JOI Fellows find and strengthen their own voices as organizers and leaders through our dynamic combination of hands-on experience, high-level training and Jewish community and study—and as they do so, they pass it on, bringing people together and building power through vibrant grassroots organizing campaigns.

## Youth Speak Out: A Powerful Story

**W**e’d like to tell you a story of one such group of grassroots activists—and how, with the support of JOI alumni and fellows, they are raising their voices with courage, skill and amazing effectiveness.

*It’s an April night and 170 people fill the pews at Temple Shalom in Newton—but it’s not your usual synagogue crowd. Almost all are high school students, some teens of color, some white. They hail from urban and suburban schools in greater Boston, representing some of the area’s most affluent districts as well as some of the poorest. But whatever their differences, they have come there with a common sense of purpose: to persuade two state representatives to do whatever they can to restore jobs for urban youth and protect funding for public schools in both cities and suburbs. As one young speaker puts it “We are here together so we don’t have to pit the cities and the suburbs against each other.”*

This gathering at Temple Shalom was the first-ever rally organized by YMORE—Youth of Massachusetts for a Reformed Economy. YMORE is a groundbreaking new coalition of seven urban and suburban youth organizations based in greater Boston. Its mission is to ensure that youth programs in Massachusetts receive adequate resources, and that state budgets reflect an investment in the future of all children. In a city where lines of neighborhood, color, religion and class can be frustratingly hard to breach, YMORE is all about building alliances across boundaries: “We join suburban and urban hands together because our future is collective, not individual.”



*Fast-forward to October, and a forum for gubernatorial candidates at Temple Israel in Boston. Of the 1200 people in attendance, almost 150 are youth representing YMORE. With the help of JOI Fellow Nina Mukerji, they have been organizing around their signature issue of summer jobs for months. JOI alumna Ilana Lerman of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston has met with them to prep before the event—and they are primed to make their voices heard. They know their hard work has paid off when each of the four gubernatorial candidates pledges to*

*dedicate 8 million dollars in their first budget proposal to youth job programs targeted to combat urban violence.*

YMORE wouldn't exist today if not for JOI. The group was the brainchild of JOI's Teen Organizing Caucus—the JOI Fellows and alumni already mentioned, plus alumni Chris Messinger and Dan Gelbtuch, with a passion for helping young people bring their voices to the policy arena. They saw the chance to leverage the influence of suburban institutions on behalf of urban teens, as well as to break down barriers of race, class and religion. The result is a powerful forum for youth to raise their voices—and make a difference that reverberates throughout their communities.

## A Year of Challenge and Growth

In addition to YMORE, this year's JOI Fellows are playing dynamic roles in a variety of other grassroots social justice efforts. At thirteen, they are the largest yet of JOI's Fellowship classes. Like those before them, they bring a wealth of talent and experience, a passionate commitment to tikkun olam, and an eagerness to hone their skills at fostering social change. As always, they started out the year with a five-day orientation retreat. Then, wasting no time, they joined a critical local organizing campaign—the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition's voter registration drive. After a large naturalization ceremony at Faneuil Hall on August 26, JOI Fellows were there to greet the new citizens and help them register to vote. In all, we helped more than 70 new voters gain a voice in the political process of their adopted country.

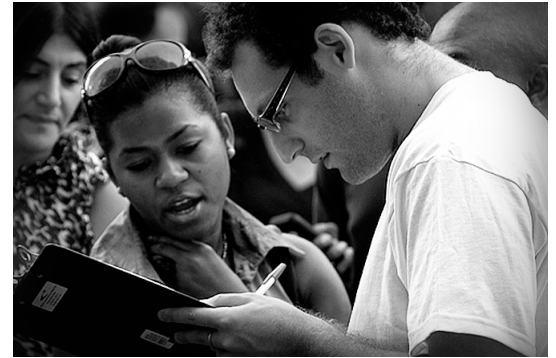
For our Fellows, it was a fitting beginning to a year of hands-on organizing tempered with Jewish study and community. As you read this, they are well into their placements, immersed in the day-to-day-challenges of organizing campaigns. Their contributions include:

- Creating a movement for food justice among college students around the country through the Real Food Challenge.
- Registering, educating and mobilizing voters from under-represented communities through MassVote.
- Strengthening connections between schools and low-income families through United Interfaith Action in New Bedford.
- Promoting a fully inclusive community for LGBT Jews through Keshet.
- Organizing human service, education, property and public service employees through two SEIU locals, and helping Massachusetts Early Childhood Educators United to create a non-traditional union.



This year, such work is taking place against a backdrop of dynamic growth for JOI as a whole. As our core Fellowship program expands, we continue to extend our scope and influence, reaching out to new constituencies, institutions and locations.

As a lead training agency for the collaboration of Brandeis University and BBYO to create Impact Boston, we have introduced community organizing to nearly 100 Jewish high school students participating in summer service learning. JOI Fellows and alumni train the students and the staff who work with them in an innovative social justice curriculum, with modules on power and oppression, pathways to creating social change and organizing skills.



Jewish Funds for Justice's interfaith Community Organizing Residency, for which JOI is the Jewish partner, launched its first cohort of fifteen apprentice organizers this September. Placed in leading social justice groups in New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, and the San Francisco Bay Area, participants from different faith backgrounds will gain hands-on organizing experience, reflect on social change from the perspectives of their diverse faiths and receive regular mentoring from seasoned organizers.

As a sign of growing interest in organizing as a powerful tool for building Jewish community, we are increasingly invited to share our expertise with Jewish organizations. Most recently we offered a workshop entitled "Inspiration, Challenge, and Commitment: What Can the Framework of Community Organizing Offer Jewish Engagement Professionals?" to 35 staff members of Hillel and Birthright Israel NEXT, with funding from the Jim Joseph Foundation.

## A Bold New Venture

Finally, we want to share with you an exciting piece of news about JOI's future. In a strategic partnership with Jewish Funds for Justice, this year we are finalizing the launch of a national center for Jewish organizing—a giant leap toward JOI's long-time dream of bringing our work to scale. A yet to be named new organization envisioned to unify national Jewish organizing efforts and bring the strongest in the field together, this venture will train, develop, place and mentor hundreds of top quality Jewish organizers within and outside the Jewish community, transforming and strengthening leaders and institutions nationwide as they work for a more just, inclusive and compassionate society. JOI's Boston-based Fellowship will become a core program of the entity, along with JFSJ's five year old Seminary Leadership Project, which provides community organizing and leadership development training for students who seek to make a difference in the Jewish community and beyond through their leadership in the rabbinate, cantorship, and education. Headquartered in Boston with JOI's



staff at the helm, other local efforts will also continue, made stronger by the resources, visibility and efficiencies that a national organization can provide. The Jewish organizing hub we have developed here will make Boston a linchpin of a new national Jewish Organizers Network, that will bring together organizers working within and outside of the Jewish community for mentoring, training and support.

You might ask why we're embarking on this expansion in such precarious economic times, when so many nonprofits are struggling to survive on diminished funding. There are several important reasons. Over the last decade nationally, organizing has increasingly become a tool for not only building strong Jewish leaders but also vibrant Jewish communities of meaning and purpose, where people share their stories, craft a common mission and act powerfully on that mission by working for change within and outside of the Jewish world. Such work has shown tremendous promise for revitalizing Jewish communal life and strengthening Jewish



contributions to larger efforts toward social and economic justice. We have partnered with JFSJ to unleash the potential of organizing as a transformative force in the Jewish community, and bringing it to scale. Furthermore, we believe historically this is just the moment for a bold and visionary venture. As the gap between rich and poor becomes a chasm, steps toward equality are met with vicious backlash and communities must cope with disappearing public resources. We believe now is when we need to ramp up our efforts to strengthen our communities and engage those who are most vulnerable in raising their voices and advocating for their needs.

## Don't Hold Back!

This bold new step would not be happening without your generosity and commitment. It is you who make it possible for JOI to shout out loud, to raise our voices like a shofar, and to help others to do the same. You are an essential part of our community, and our vision for the future includes your voice, your Jewish values, and your passion for social change. So please, as Isaiah exhorts us, don't hold back. Give generously to JOI this year--and together we will continue to repair and transform our world.