

Incoming President Remarks  
Linda Sacks  
Savannah Jewish Federation Annual Meeting  
September 7, 2022

Good evening.

Over 3 decades ago our middle son Joshua wrote his Bar Mitzvah speech. Steve and I nixed his opening line, but I'm going to appropriate it tonight. "I would like to thank all those who made tonight mandatory." Especially Ken Sadler.

Seriously, though, I am honored and somewhat apprehensive as I become the 42nd President of the Savannah Jewish Federation. I'm humbled, following in the footsteps of so many outstanding leaders.

Federation's goals this year are threefold:

**Security, Community and Unity**

A few minutes ago, Adam outlined the major points of our initiative with the Security Community Network. History teaches us that Jews are rarely 100% safe anywhere. Starting with slavery in Egypt, through martyrdom at the hands of the Romans and murder by the Crusaders, we led precarious lives. More modern times heralded the Spanish Inquisition, Pogroms, the Holocaust, the Gulag. Currently we have seemingly never-ending armed conflicts with our Arab neighbors in the modern state of Israel.

Anti-Semitism in the United States was certainly less violent, often subtle, taking the form of quotas, or exclusion from schools, jobs, clubs, hotels and restricted neighborhoods. Today we read daily of incitement to physical and verbal violence from both the far left and far right. The massacre at Tree of Life synagogue, and the hostage incident in Colleyville demonstrate an escalating frequency and intensity of anti-Semitic incidents. Recent data from the ADL supports this frightening statistic.

A major role of Federation has always been to protect and secure the safety of Jews in jeopardy. Previously this meant Jews in other countries. We have a responsibility to the members our Jewish organizations who come to play, socialize, work and pray in our brick and mortar structures. They must FEEL secure and MUST BE secure. As Adam explained this is best done in a uniform manner with interconnectivity among our Jewish institutions and organized security groups such as SCN, GBI and local law enforcement. Federation will ensure that this connectivity happens ASAP.

What is a community? The dictionary defines a community as a group of people with diverse characteristics, linked by social ties, common shared perspectives, attitudes, and goals. Its members engage in joint actions.

Jean Vanier, a Canadian Catholic philosopher and theologian put it beautifully when he said that: *“One of the marvelous things about community is that it enables us to welcome and help people in a way we couldn’t as individuals. When we pool our strength and share the work and responsibility, we can welcome many people, even those in deep distress, and perhaps help them find self-confidence and inner healing.”*

Through Federation, our community helped settle Holocaust survivors. In just one night in 1984 we raised \$50K for operation Moses, which brought 8,000 Ethiopian Jews to Israel. Federation enabled Soviet Refusniks to leave the USSR. Federation, had structure in place to provide immediate aid to victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Harvey and to send timely aid to the Ukrainian Jewish Community. On a daily basis JFS provides relief in the form of cash grants, paid bills and social work help to those who seek it, never asking with which, if any, shul they are affiliated.

Community by its nature is diverse. Federation is the umbrella organization, the big tent, the sum total of all the different components. We need the impulse of each individual component, otherwise we stagnate. But without the respect and empathy of each segment for the other segments, we are no longer deserving of the name community.

Thirty years ago, we were truly a community. Yes, each of us gave priority to a specific group, maybe a synagogue, or Hadassah, or even a secular organization such as United Way. But we shared a give-and-take of ideas and social discourse within our community. We supported each other’s institutions and favorite charities. It pains me deeply that we have developed a silo mentality, one showing no respect and no empathy, indeed, even enmity for other Jewish groups. This situation is on its way to becoming the ingrained Savannah status quo. There is an art to knowing when to hide an issue under the rug or kick it down the road, versus deciding “Let’s DEAL with it”. The time has come to face up and deal with it.

Unity is a condition of harmony, a totality of related parts, the state of being joined together or in agreement. Unity is difficult to find and hard to maintain. When a group of people act as one and are on the same page, they’re displaying unity. When we bicker and are disorganized, there’s no unity.

During WW II Winston Churchill said that *“when there is no enemy within, the enemies outside cannot hurt you.”* We desperately need unity within our Jewish community, not only for Shalom Bayit, but for the sake of security.

Are there any steps that Federation can take towards unifying our community? We can look for opportunities that satisfy or are at least non-offensive to everyone. We can seek means to drop barriers to participation. We can each strive to be less offended by others’ actions, even if we disagree. We can work toward small victories that bring us together. Here are a few specific suggestions:

1. Our security initiative can be a major unifying project. We can modify plans as needed to fit individual organizational needs. Initially, using grants and specifically raised funds, Federation can

foot the majority of the bill. Hopefully other organizations will eventually step forward to help financially.

2. Perhaps we can enlarge the Eruv extending it to include more affordable housing units, helping those who desire to be Shomer Shabbat relocate. Our Rabbis say: *“where there is a rabbinic will, there is a halachic way.”* I say *“Where there is a community Will, there is a fiscal way.”*

3. We can encourage non-conflicting scheduling for Jewish events, to allow for more participation. In a small community, no one should have to choose between attending simultaneous Jewish simchas and gatherings.

4. Federation can urge all members of our community to lend their financial support as possible, and to participate in the functions of our three synagogues, Chabad, the JEA, Rambam, Shalom School, JEA PreSchool, Hadassah, etc.

Our printed program visually illustrates that our goals for federation this year, SECURITY, COMMUNITY AND UNITY have in common the letter U. The Board, officers, and professional staff of the Federation can form ideas, organize, and provide leadership, but ultimately success depends on each and every one of you. Your active participation and input are crucial to our success.

The Federation Annual Meeting is always in September, usually falling in the Hebrew month of Elul. Elul is the month immediately prior to the High Holidays, the month in which we are supposed to do a Cheshbon Hanefesh – a soul searching - in preparation for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Our sages say that Elul, spelled in Hebrew as Aleph, Lamed, Vuv, Lamed is an acronym for *“Ani l’dodi v’dodi li, I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine”*, a verse from King Solomon’s Song of Songs. According to Midrash, these four words of love refer to the relationship between HaShem and the Jewish people, making Elul very special. During Elul, Moshe ascended Mt. Sinai for the third time, newly hewn blank tablets in his arms, ready to receive the Torah again. He fervently pleaded with God to renew His relationship with the Israelites who had just committed the sin of the Golden Calf, a few short weeks after their miraculous liberation from Egypt. Elul therefore is also considered a time of reconciliation. It is a time of building a true and enduring relationship EVEN after it has been seriously challenged. I hope and pray, that under Federation’s initiative and leadership, we can all embark on a reconciliation process within our community. Together, we have the potential to make SECURITY, COMMUNITY, and UNITY a reality.

Thanks for listening to me. This new year will be a time for me to listen to you. I welcome your input, feedback, even your complaints and criticisms. May we all be inscribed for a good year.