

YOSEF ABRAMOWITZ

by CAROL ZALL



Yosef I. Abramowitz is only in his mid-forties but, as he's quick to point out, he has been involved in activism for decades. "I was fortunate enough to start early," he says, "and I've been doing this stuff for twenty-five years now. So it kind of adds up." One could say that Abramowitz is an overactive activist. He has a plethora of titles and is involved with a seemingly impossible number of projects. Until 2006, he was the CEO of Jewish Family & Life! (JFL), a Boston-based Jewish educational nonprofit that he cofounded in 1996 and that bills itself as the largest producer of original online Jewish content in the world. In addition to the usual CEO duties, his role at JFL included overseeing its many print and web publications – ranging from Jewish teen magazine *JVibe* and independent intellectual journal *Sh'ma*, to websites such as SocialAction.com and JBooks – as well as chairing the Koret International Book Awards.

Abramowitz – who is known as “Yossi” to his friends and colleagues – is also the president of the Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union (UCSJ), a grassroots organization that combats anti-Semitism and xenophobia in the former Soviet states. On top of that, he’s a fellow with the World Jewish Forum, has written for a large number of Jewish publications, and is the co-author of the 1997 *Jewish Family & Life* guidebook, which sold fifty thousand copies. But wait, there’s more. He has been on hunger strikes for Soviet Jews, helped establish a political party in Israel (the recently formed *Atid Echad*), and received a Covenant Award for excellence in Jewish education in 2004. He has also been named by the *Forward* newspaper as one of the fifty most influential Jews in America.

Abramowitz stepped down from his CEO role at JFL in 2006 in order to spend a few years in Israel with his wife, Rabbi Susan Silverman, and their five children on a kibbutz in the Negev and to pursue new opportunities. Since moving to Israel, his activities have included advocating for Sudanese refugees in Israel and hatching plans to build a solar power plant there. Clearly, Abramowitz is a man on a mission – maybe several missions.

Abramowitz has been politically aware from an early age. Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1964, his family moved to Israel when he was five years old. After living in Israel from kindergarten through second grade – an experience that he says left an indelible imprint of Jewish optimism on his soul – the family returned to the U.S. His parents divorced, and Abramowitz spent some of his formative childhood years living in what he describes as a “hippie commune” in Boston with his mother. He still remembers being pulled out of his Solomon Schechter school one day so he could attend “civil disobedience training” in the back room of a Communist bookstore in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The result, he says, was that by the eighth grade he not only had acquired Jewish literacy, but also “was not afraid of police dogs or water cannons or tear gas.”

Abramowitz became involved with Jewish activism through the Young Judea youth movement, which emphasizes leadership and Zionism. He attended Boston University, where he was active in

student politics, created his own major in Jewish Public Policy, and helped start the campus anti-apartheid movement. He also took a course with Elie Wiesel called “Burden, Responsibility and Privilege of Rebellion: Literature of Memory” in 1986, the year Wiesel was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. “The place was rocking,” Abramowitz recalls. “I mean, it was really extraordinary – this sense that history can be changed, not just witnessed. And [the fact] that we were doing the anti-apartheid movement as he won the Nobel Peace Prize was very energizing.”

Abramowitz’s education as an activist took a new turn that same year when, while attending a conference of the World Union of Jewish Students (WUJS) in Jerusalem, he was unexpectedly elected to the post of chairman. (The first-ever chair of WUJS, Abramowitz is quick to point out, was Albert Einstein.) Instead of going on to law school as planned, he spent the next three and a half years chairing WUJS, “running around the world” – to Paris, Singapore, South Africa, Australia – creating campaigns with Jewish students across the globe.

According to Hillel Levine, a professor of sociology and religion at Boston University who taught Abramowitz in college and has been a mentor and close friend ever since, the WUJS experience was a crucial one for Abramowitz. Levine – who is also president of the International Institute for Mediation and Historical Conciliation – says that Abramowitz “not only developed a sense for the world Jewish polity, but also got to know all kinds of people in various strategic places in Jewish life, including various philanthropists. It was very exciting to watch and to be a part of that.”

Abramowitz insists, however, that activism “has never been a vocation.” Instead, he says, it’s about values. “If you’re going to be true to your values, you’ve got to do something about them, and since there aren’t that many people always doing something about them, you end up somehow being a leader. I actually have a formula from my youth movement days, which is that values are what you live by, vision is what you live towards, and leadership is just simply living your values towards your vision. So anyone can do it. Anyone can be a leader.”

Abramowitz next earned a master's degree in journalism from Columbia University, taking the opportunity to do coursework at the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Hebrew Union College (HUC) while he was in New York. After stints working as an investigative reporter and editor at *Moment* magazine, as well as working for the "Panim el Panim" program in Washington D.C., which runs seminars for Jewish high school students on public policy and Jewish values, Abramowitz was ready to strike out with his own publication. Searching for a topic that would "speak to a million Jews," he hit on the idea of producing a magazine about Jewish parenting and family life.

The experience of being married to a rabbi convinced Abramowitz that such a magazine would find a large and hungry audience. "One of the open secrets in Jewish life is that the spouse of the rabbi knows everything but can't say anything, and should pretend as if they don't know everything. Because the rabbi comes home and has to talk to somebody," says Abramowitz. He recounts how his wife Susan would come home each day and tell him "stories of people just wrestling with real life issues – a lot of interfaith related things – and realizing there's just a huge vacuum, a huge vacuum; that the Jewish community was completely out of touch with any of the real needs of the people. I mean, it was unbelievably crazy."

Together with Sue Laden, with whom he had worked at *Moment*, Abramowitz launched *Jewish Family and Life!* as a full color print magazine in 1996. They wanted to offer something different, accessible, life affirming – and fun. "I wasn't going to do it in a way that was going to be predictable," says Abramowitz. "So we came up with certain values that were going to really reconstitute Judaism away from the muse of Jewish institutions, and make it relevant in people's lives, in their homes."

Jewish Family and Life! had limited success as a print magazine, so Abramowitz turned instead to the Internet, transforming JFL into a multimedia company. More than a decade later, after what Abramowitz calls "an unbelievable ride," there is no question that JFL has been a great success. The organization – now headquartered

in Newton, Massachusetts – has an annual budget of four million dollars and a large Web presence. JFL’s Internet offerings include a dozen websites aimed at every Jew imaginable, from the blogging adolescent to the newly converted, and everyone in between. And JFL now occupies the entire floor of a building, which Abramowitz likes to refer to as “10,000 square feet of Dream Factory for the Jewish People.”

Despite the successes, Abramowitz in person comes across less as a business leader who has a knack for raising large sums of money, and more like a grad student about to address a crowd at a rally. He exudes enthusiasm and energy and a certain idealistic zeal, and although he might be wearing a suit and tie, there is little doubt that he still sees himself as a rabble-rouser.

And he *is* a rabble-rouser. Referring to a series of articles first published in Boston’s *Jewish Advocate* newspaper investigating fraud at the Jewish National Fund (JNF), which Abramowitz wrote in 1996, Hillel Levine calls him “the most important gadfly” of our generation. The series explored controversial allegations of questionable accounting practices at the JNF, as well as accusations that little of the money the JNF collected was actually being sent to Israel. “I mean this man single-handedly took on the JNF – *took on the JNF*. And found that it was not only using misleading rhetoric, but that it was corrupt from top to bottom. I mean, I can’t tell you what a revelation that was – I mean, this was motherhood,” Levine says. (The JNF was later cleared of fraudulent activity by a committee, although controversy still exists about some of its practices.)

As the investigation turned nasty, Levine says there were times when he feared for Abramowitz’s safety. “I felt he was going to probably end up face down in the Charles River; I mean he was really in danger.” But despite having seen “the sewers of Jewish organizational life,” Levine believes that Abramowitz emerged with his ideals intact. “There’s a kind of clear-eyed, optimistic, almost naïve love for the Jewish people. This is absolutely extraordinary – how this man is capable of functioning on both levels – I don’t know of too many people who do it. It’s part of his power, it’s part of the way in which

he's successful in raising money, because he really, really believes. I mean, he goes to funders with a kind of intellectual and spiritual integrity that they don't often see among the various *schnorrers* of the world."

Part of Abramowitz's success can be attributed to the fact that not only is he a man on a mission, but he's also a man with a vision. For him, his work at JFL has not been about simply building a media empire or acquiring magazine titles; instead, it has been about transforming Jewish life. As Abramowitz sees it, one of the major challenges facing world Jewry is to make Judaism relevant to people's lives. In order to do this, Judaism itself has to be shaken up, its values redefined and recalibrated in order to give it meaning and staying power in the future.

"In any kind of enterprise, organization, civilization, if you don't have a sense of purpose that's clearly defined, you start to weaken, you start to crumble," he says. "I think one can say with some degree of confidence and collective humility that the influence of the Jewish people upon civilization as a percentage of our absolute numbers is probably unparalleled. And I think we've rested a little too much on those laurels, saying, 'Oh well, look at what we have done, aren't we great?' or 'Isn't that a reason to be Jewish?' – and I don't think that translates into the future. I actually feel a special responsibility to say, 'Well, that was great, what are we going to do next? And what's the purpose of the Jewish people in the twenty-first century and moving forward?'"

Abramowitz's personal answer to the question of Jewish purpose is that the Jewish people are here to be a catalyst in the world for moral evolution. But, he asks, "If the Jewish community is meant to be a catalyst in the world, then who's going to be the catalyst for the Jewish community?" That's where Abramowitz and his various partner groups come in. Through his work with organizations such as JFL and the World Jewish Forum, he wants to reinvigorate Judaism by coming up with a core of Jewish values that have meaning for a wide variety of Jews, and then to articulate those values through various projects that will reach Jews all over the world.

One such project that has launched successfully is Jewish Social Action Month (JSAM). Abramowitz first conceived the idea for a social action month while at JFL, and then garnered support for it from the KolDor network of Jewish leaders, of which he is a member. They then gained the endorsement of the Knesset, which passed a resolution declaring Cheshvan to be global Jewish Social Action Month. (Cheshvan – which usually falls around October or November – was chosen because of the fact that no Jewish holidays occur during the month, and it is therefore considered to be *mar*, or bitter. Jewish Social Action Month aims to “take the bitterness out of Cheshvan” by transforming it into a month of positive action.) Other resolutions followed in the U.S. Congress and the British House of Commons, and the first JSAM was launched in 2005.

Abramowitz marvels at the way JSAM got off the ground. He says that two websites – www.cheshvan.org and www.socialaction.com – “were the engines that open-sourced the idea.” Once the idea was out there, he said people would ask him who JSAM belonged to. “And the answer was, ‘It belongs to the Jewish people’ – which drives people *nuts*. But it’s true, it’s true, it’s true. We were playing a catalytic role, with KolDor, in a new model. Not the command-control model, [but] an open-source model. Who does Shabbat belong to? Who does Pesach belong to? You know, who does Chanukah belong to? Right? So in doing this experiment, we actually came up with the next piece of the strategic plan for the Jewish people.”

That next piece of “the plan” is the realization that no one institution can accomplish such goals alone. “You can’t do it all yourself,” says Abramowitz. “You shouldn’t, you’re not able to, you’re not smart enough, you don’t have the resources, it’s just a ludicrous notion...it can’t just be one institution, it has to be a global Jewish effort. And so to do that we have strategies, from the business world, of leveraging and open-sourcing.”

The real value of the work he and his partners have done, he says, will be in making their ideas and strategies available for others to use. “Once we give away the key strategy pieces, someone else can

come along, steal it, and do even a better job. Is that a failure or is that a success?”

Using projects like jsAM to articulate clearly defined Jewish values is also part of the big idea that Abramowitz refers to as “Peoplehood,” something that is bigger – more inclusive – than nationalism, religion or culture. “Our Jewish values are the building blocks of Peoplehood, that’s the DNA of it all. And imagine what would happen if you had the values run clearly through the religion, the culture, the nationalism, and that if you said, ‘What do the Jewish people stand for?’ you actually knew what they stood for. How about that?”

Jewish values are not just something Abramowitz wrestles with at work; he’s also deeply committed to living a meaningful Jewish life at home. “This is a really extraordinary person,” says Levine. “Everything is integrated: the way in which he is with his children, the way in which he is with people, his original approaches to Jewish life, his leadership, his friendships – this is a real person.”

Susan Berrin, who has worked closely with Abramowitz as editor of the journal *Sh’m’a* for the last eight years, agrees. “He brings his values home,” she says. “To be able to synthesize your professional life and values that you’re trying to put forward at work, to be able to live them at home as well, is really unusual and profoundly difficult.”

One of the values Abramowitz and his wife have “brought home” has been a desire to help those less fortunate than themselves. Two of their five children, Adar and Zamir, were adopted from Ethiopia. Having worked on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry, Abramowitz felt a connection to that country, and wanted to bring something of its heritage into his family’s life. And, he says, in a world in which thirty-five thousand children die of hunger each day, “the only answer is really to open your hearts and your home and your family if there’s going to be a true *tikkun* (repairing [the world]).”

Abramowitz is also involving his children in the kind of activism he cherishes so much. His blog (www.peoplehood.org) features a photo of his daughter, Aliza, posing with actor George Clooney at a 2006 rally for Darfur in Washington, D.C. when she was thirteen

years old. And together with Aliza and his next eldest daughter, Hallel, he has cofounded WorldManna.org, which is trying to convince food manufacturers to donate one percent of their proceeds to help combat world hunger.

Following his own formula of living by his values and towards his vision, the most recent change in Abramowitz's life was his 2006 move to Israel. He and his family relocated to Kibbutz Ketura, on the Jordanian border half an hour north of Eilat, for what they expect will be a few years. The move arose out of a desire to spend quality family time together in Israel; in addition, Abramowitz and his wife were eager for their two adopted sons to have the chance to be around more Ethiopian Jews.

True to form, Abramowitz arrived in Israel in August 2006 and hit the ground running. Noticing that the sun was very intense on Kibbutz Ketura, he started asking why they weren't using more solar power on the kibbutz. He soon learned that the kibbutz's fields were located in an area that gets some of the most productive sunlight in the world, and he is now involved in plans to build a solar power plant there. If things go well, there will also be a partner plant built on the Jordanian side of the border.

Abramowitz, who likes to see the big picture, considers this latest development to be a logical continuation of his life's work. He wants to help Israel transform itself into a solar-based economy, a plan that he sees as a manifestation of Jewish values in many ways. "How can the Jewish state be a light unto the nations when seventy-five percent of its electricity is produced by coal and it is considering building a major nuclear power plant to help meet Israel's growing electricity needs?" he asks. Energy independence will, he believes, contribute to peace and stability in the region, and a by-product of the plants will be solar-powered desalination. "The more water," he says, "the more peace. For Israel to live its environmental values is a form of Zionism. We want to inspire Jewish communities worldwide to become carbon neutral by 2020."

This kind of ambitious plan, combining both Jewish values and a daring entrepreneurialism, are what led Levine to hold Abramowitz

in such high regard. “If we had a hundred Yosef Abramowitzes in the Jewish community...Jewish life would be completely different,” says Levine. “If we had a hundred Yosef Abramowitzes in the world, then the world would be different. One realizes just what quality people can do, people who are prepared to take risks, who are independent minded, who are honest. He’s enormously powerful, enormously powerful.”

In addition to working to make the solar power plants a reality, Abramowitz continues to be involved with JFL, the World Jewish Forum, and various other political and activist groups in Israel. He’s working hard, he says, but his energy level is high and being in Israel has given him a great sense of replenishment. He’s also hoping to write a book while he’s there – its working title is *Peoplehood with Purpose* – and he’ll be wrestling with the question of how the Jewish people will meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. “I don’t believe that the way we’re constituted now, that we can actually play our historic role in civilization,” he says. “In an age of weapons of mass destruction, and in an age of real threats to the future viability of the planet, in an age in which there’s six and a half billion people on the planet and a chronic scarcity of resources, if we don’t step forward, then who will?”

Clearly, Yossi Abramowitz will.