

August 21, 2020

Jews United for Justice (JUFJ)

Molly Amster, Executive Director of Jews United for Justice

Interviewers: Iman AbdoulKarim & Fatima Bamba

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00:00:04 Molly's Background

- Moved to Baltimore in 2007 to start a farm and took a job in the Comprehensive Housing Assistance Incorporated (CHAI). Exposed her to overt racism and anti-Semitism. At different points in the work she took a job as a community liaison for schools in Baltimore, and quickly realized that in the schools she was working in, her presence was unwelcomed. Met with anti-Semitism and skepticism about her presence, which she now knows stemmed from communal histories and legitimate concerns around her, as a Jewish woman, working in Black schools.
- Worked on the 21st Century Schools Campaign to obtain almost 1 billion dollars for Baltimore school and was one of the largest public investment in Baltimore City. This was one of her first experiences with organizing and lobbying.
- After this, she tried to determine an appropriate role in movement work as a White Jewish woman. Later began participating in anti-racism training for herself, and this changed how she saw herself contributing to the community and social justice initiatives. She later led multi-racial dialogues with Black community members, White members, and black and white Jewish members. In this experience, she witness growth in people who were previously unaware of systemic issues.
- Then she got into the role of creating a Baltimore branch for Jews United for Justice (JUFJ).

00:05:17: Organization mission

- JUFJ is focused on organizing the Jewish community around social change as opposed to organizing within communities of colors. Her job is to make the Jewish community capable of doing the work to bring change. It is about doing the work and training / educating people of privilege to do the work. This can be an uphill battle for the Jewish community here, in the Baltimore area. Because it is a conservative community, and has one of the largest orthodox communities per capita.
- Through the work, she found like-minded peers and a Jewish community aligned with her values. Over the past six years, there is a new synagogue (Hinenu: The Baltimore Justice Shtiebl) in the community that can be viewed as relatively radical and adopted police and prison abolition as their issue for the year to learn and organize around. Members are gender queer and have other historically marginalized identities. This tends to be a more welcoming place for Jewish people for color. This is a space Molly would have not thought possible ten years ago.

00:09:32 Community Building; Assessment of work; Challenges enacting social change

- A critical part of JUFJ's work is establishing and maintaining relationships with (non-JUFJ) community leaders who are impacted by the social justice issues JUFJ is working to support. JUFJ views their job as being translators for their Jewish community. They take ideas that maybe new or radical for their Jewish community, and translate them in a way people can hear, process, and get on board with. They have to walk the line of upholding those values and being aligned with partners on their demands. While still being accepted by the mainstream Jewish community- this is difficult, a constant struggle. It requires a lot of relationship building. Their association with the Jewish Federation of Baltimore, a centralized organization, helps JUFJ maintain their relationships with the Jewish community. Sometimes this means they know they are not going to be well received by all members of the Jewish community.
- For example, fundraising can be conditioned on not upsetting the larger national organizations or Jewish business owners. They lost funding from a national organization because of their values. JUFJ receives funding from these organizations' Jewish Life funds.
- But this speaks to the origins of JUFJ. JUFJ was working with Unite in the D.C. to support workers who were being mistreated and having trouble negotiating with a business owner. And the national organization was upset that JUFJ united with the unionized works and soon after received a grant for funding. JUFJ is a place that doesn't compromise their values to meet the bottom line. That has been the challenge.

00:16:10 Organizational Mission; Assessment of Work

- Molly and JUFJ have found that the best way to get access to the synagogue and national organizations is to build relationships through education. They program around how to talk to family and friends about racism, screening documentaries, etc. Educational programming is now a part of JUFJ's strategic plan to equip the community to bring about the change they want to see. They educate Jewish community members on acknowledging racism so they can contribute effectively to ending it. JUFJ also does a social justice roundtable with different congregations and informal prayer groups. They meet every other month to talk about their social justice work.
- Partnering with synagogue members and one of the most conservative synagogues to talk with members about police reform, that synagogue also signed a BLM solidarity letter. BLM's previous values on Zionism and Israel makes BLM a conservative issue for the Jewish community in Baltimore. This is an example of how times have changed as it relates to social justice issues in the communities JUFJ works with.

00:21:40 Theological understandings of social justice and activism.

- Jewish left gets a lot of push back from orthodox spaces that are more right-wing, for "cherry picking." However, conservative and right wing approaches can also be viewed as cherry picking, and ignoring the concept of "welcome the stranger" and not engaging the freedom story at Passover and failing to see how the concept of welcoming the stranger applies to them or the current socio-political moment.
- Molly's own reexamination of Jewish texts, as a part of work at JUFJ and outside of it, has helped her find meaning in revisiting texts originally assumed to not be aligned with values, and now seeing that they align with social justice work. JUFJ has been working on renters' rights. They have used texts and the Jewish tradition that outlines landlords' responsibilities and conditions for evictions. According to the texts, you cannot evict someone in the "rainy season." Coronavirus and current pandemic can be considered a rainy season. JUFJ brings in text in a lot of their campaigns to remind people of the link

between social justice and Jewish values. JUFJ was one of the first spaces a lot of members felt that there was alignment between social justice and Jewish values.

00:26:18 Assessment of relief work; practices to accommodate social distancing

- Because JUFJ has always worked across the state, meeting via Zoom is not new. But a challenge has been determining whether they do in person events or not. When research came out on protest and uprising were not contributing to an increase in coronavirus spread, JUFJ senior leadership was more open to encouraging people to go to protests. Prior senior leadership was not telling people to join protests, and JUFJ members and community are privileged and at home. However, people who are suffering are not home and protesting.
- JUFJ does not do direct service work, but have been working to end contracts with ICE. They are considered hanging door hangers to raise awareness about ending contracts and are now considering knocking on people's doors. Navigating policies on in-person gatherings has been challenging.

00:29:15 mourning and remembrance; practices to accommodate social distancing

- They organize on Tisha B'Av which is a day of mourning for catastrophes in Jewish history. JUFJ adds in contemporary catastrophes happening in current socio-political contexts. Last year they had a big rally at the detention center with 300-500 attendees, they read the Book of Lamentations, they sang, and facilitated a civil disobedience action blocking the prisoner entrance. It was sad and hard not being able to replicate that this year. Instead, this year, they did 3 actions highlighting 3 catastrophes. With 3 small prayer groups. The first focused on police accountability and mourning police violence, the second took place at Howard County Detention that focused on family separation and ICE cruel and inhumane policies, and the third was virtually focused on the statewide eviction crisis. In person ones limited to 15 people. There could be over 1 million people evicted by the end of the year.
 - One of the leaders created a beautiful video highlighting the action (going to send to Iman & Fatima).

32:40 Assessment of relief work

- Coronavirus has also shifted our focus. Not entirely, we have been working on renters' rights for 6 years. JUFJ began to step away from renters' rights because a lot of the people leading renters' rights are not directly impacted. JUFJ felt that they should put their efforts behind campaigns being led by people directly impacted. Instead last year they aligned with Out for Justice, and worked on a juvenile interrogation bill, incarcerated voter rights, and police accountability. Since the coronavirus pandemic, JUFJ has returned to the renters' right work because of the increased need. Now, a lot of organizing groups with large bases are pushing this issue amongst their followers. Working with them to call for eviction freeze and other things to prevent evictions.

00:35:51 Impact of Coronavirus on privileged communities

- There have been members who have been sick and one member lost someone close to them. But JUFJ has not seen a large impact on their community, likely because they work with a White affluent community they have not been touched by the gravity of the situation. In JUFJ it has not come up as something people are struggling with in a significant impact.

00:38:27 Relationship with government

- JUFJ is 501 c(3) and 501 c(4)- they do have campaign funds and endorse candidates for elections. Over the years, they have been working to provide spaces where constituents can have conversations with their elected officials. For example, a leader testified on a criminal justice bill. There was a mix up on turning in her testimony and the deadline had passed. However, she has her legislator in her home with other JUFJ members and has since spoken to staffers and has worked with them to have her testimony submitted. That would have not been possible if they had not been working over the years to develop relationships with elected officials.
- Another example: Eric Costello was hosted in one of our members' homes to talk with constituents about their issues. He has now developed a relationship with JUFJ member where she calls and asks questions, and he responds.
- Often in an organizing space, JUFJ is one of the organizations with relationships with elected officials. Now doing the work on the renters' rights bill and a water bill that needs to be implemented. They have the access to government offices, which is valuable and also puts JUFJ in the uncomfortable position of being gatekeepers. They are trying to figure out how to provide this access to partners and ensure they are invited when they have meetings with these government offices. For example, when the explosion happened in Northwest Baltimore, they knew that it was in a neighborhood with a growing Latinx community. They reached out to CASA, helped connect the organization with Council Presidents' Office leadership to help find members who were evacuated. People on the street were being evacuated. At this moment, relationships with the government are stronger than ever and increasingly trying to distribute that access to their partners and to not gate keep.