



A bearded and armed Mark Sokoll during his service in the IDF.

JCCGB's president is still truckin' on

Sokoll's passions drive organization's success

By **Lorne Bell**
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To judge Mark Sokoll by his title is to miss the man. The 52-year-old rabbi and president and CEO of the Jewish Community Centers of Greater Boston is one of the region's most respected Jewish figures. But behind his bearish 6-foot-3-inch frame and cloud-gray Jewish afro is a different sort of leader: a disarming mix of boss and buddy, head honcho and Grateful Dead Head, proud Zionist and optimistic peacenik.

"It is forbidden for us to give ourselves over to pessimism," Sokoll said, reiterating the message of his yearly High Holiday sermon on Israel. "It can lead to really bad decision making."

That approach has played a significant role in Sokoll's professional and personal life. He has spent over two decades serving JCCGB, first as director of Jewish education and then in various executive roles. For the past seven years, he has led the organization through a difficult time, turning around stagnant membership numbers and restructuring the centers to suit the community's evolving needs.

"We were managing expenses and costs, but we weren't growing," Sokoll recalled. "Our biggest challenge was how to adjust to changes in the community, and that meant changing the way we think. We've done a lot of listening to our constituents."

Annual membership growth is now at 10 percent, and Sokoll is ushering Greater Boston's dynamic Jewish community into the new millennium with a renewed sense of hope. But his passion for Jewish service began long before he joined the ranks

of the executive elite.

The eldest of two sons, Sokoll was raised in the small South Shore community of Somerset. His father was a veteran of World War II and served as a military chaplain's field assistant. His mother was a stay-at-home mom and an active member of Somerset's tiny Jewish community, where she helped found the town's Hadassah chapter. The family attended services at the local conservative synagogue, Temple Beth El. But shul, according to Sokoll, was not where his Jewish yearning was birthed.

"We were traditional, although I wouldn't say religious," he said. "But for me, the turning point in the development of my Jewish identity was going to Camp Young Judea in Amherst, N.H."

Sokoll credited Young Judea with launching his "Jewish journey," of which music was always an integral part. As a teen, he paired his Zionist zeal with a budding love for campfire guitar sessions and the Grateful Dead. A self-proclaimed "Dead Head," he attended more than 70 concerts and is still given to quoting the band's deeply spiritual ballads.

But perhaps the most pivotal moment in Sokoll's young Jewish life came as he stood at the precipice of manhood. It was 1973, and he and his fellow Young Judeans were in Israel to begin a year-long study program before heading off to college. But within six months of setting foot on the Holy Land, 18-year-old Sokoll found himself in the middle of the Yom Kippur War.

"It was a seminal year for me," Sokoll said. "The program was put on hold and we worked in a

hospital in Jerusalem, carrying stretchers of wounded soldiers in and out. I realized, 'My God, this place really needs us.' It was at that point that I decided I was going to live [there]."

Sokoll returned to the U.S. to complete his undergraduate degree at Boston University. He delayed his move to Israel for a year to court his future wife, Margie, whom he met at the local Aliyah Center.

"The [center] suggested that if I wanted to move to Israel I should get married first, because I would spend less time in the army," Sokoll said. "Margie was working at the front desk, so I just walked up to her and said, 'Hi, I'm Mark, I'm moving to Israel, wanna' get married?'"

The two made Aliyah in 1978 and were married in 1980. Sokoll worked as a high school teacher and tour guide and taught history and politics to young officers in the IDF. After returning to the states in 1986, he earned his Master of Arts in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies from Brandeis University and was ordained at the Bet Din-Bet Achim in New York City.

Today, Sokoll is the proud father of two grown children and steers one of New England's most influential Jewish non-profit organizations. He also serves as rabbi at Temple B'nai Israel in Revere – his "part-time gig." But despite his suit, executive suite and lofty credentials, Sokoll has never lost his perspective, or his passion.

"Sometimes the light's all shining on me – other times I can barely see," he said, lifting a line from his favorite band. "What a long, strange trip it's been."