

Ruth Messinger entrusts American Jewish World Service to her deputy, Robert Bank by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [May 11, 2016](#) issue

Ruth Messinger was a politician in New York City in the 1980s and 1990s before she took the helm of a respected but low-profile nonprofit focused on international development: the American Jewish World Service.

After 17 years, Messinger, 75, is giving up the presidency of AJWS, which grew into a major player in the fight against global poverty under her leadership. In 2015, the group gave out nearly \$40 million for projects in 19 nations.

“All our work, locally and abroad, is really about learning to listen to ‘the other,’” Messinger said. “I’ve written about this in terms of Judaism’s central Shema prayer, which calls on us to listen. AJWS prides itself on being different from some other very good international human rights and development organizations because we don’t send in the troops. That may be not the right metaphor. But the entire orientation of our program staff is to say: ‘How can we help you? What’s your vision of social change?’”

In July Robert Bank, 56, the executive vice president of AJWS, will succeed Messinger, who will stay on part time. Bank grew up in South Africa in a community of Eastern European Jewish immigrants who had fled the Holocaust or pogroms. He began his career as a concert pianist, became a lawyer for New York City, and then was chief operating officer of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis, a group responding to HIV/AIDS.

Bank had met Messinger when she was Manhattan borough president and he was a city attorney.

“The grassroots work in New York that we were a part of—fighting for adequate housing [and] health care, and against discrimination—is very much like the work of groups we are currently funding at AJWS,” he said.

A secondary goal of the AJWS is to reduce anti-Semitism across the globe, Bank said.

“I was once in Thailand with a group of farmers who were trying to protect their forests from being destroyed by the government and a multinational corporation,” Bank said. “An elder, who had brought 25 children to meet us, told us he had only heard bad things about Jews, and that he was surprised that we were trying to help. We told him what we believed and why we wanted to help. He seemed satisfied with our answers. Later, he told us that he had seen the film *Life Is Beautiful* and that he was going to make sure the children see it too, so they know what the Jews have suffered.” —Religion News Service

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