

CREATING A NEW VISION FOR THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY

The Challenge of Developing Leaders and Storytellers for our Future

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We need new leadership, new stories, and new ideas to guide our American Jewish communities into the 21st century. This article ties the conceptual framework of Howard Gardner's book, Leading Minds: The Anatomy of Leadership, to the implementation of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston's strategic plan.

Moses heard the people weeping, every clan apart, each person at the entrance of his tent. The LORD was very angry, and Moses was distressed.

And Moses said to the LORD, "Why have You dealt ill with Your servant, and why have I not enjoyed Your favor, that You have laid the burden of all this people upon me?..."

"I cannot carry all this people by myself, for it is too much for me. If You would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness!"

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Gather for Me seventy of Israel's elders who have experience as elders and officers of the people, and bring them to the Tent of Meeting and let them take their place there with you. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will draw upon the spirit that is on you and put it upon them; they shall share the burden of the

people with you, and you shall not bear it alone...

Moses...gathered seventy of the people's elders and stationed them around the Tent. Then the LORD came down in a cloud and spoke to him; He drew upon the spirit that was on him and put it upon the seventy elders...

Two men, one named Eldad and the other Medad, had remained in camp; yet the spirit rested upon them...and they prophesied in the camp. A youth ran out and told Moses, saying, "Eldad and Medad are acting the prophet in the camp!" And Joshua son of Nun, Moses' attendant from his youth, spoke up and said, "My lord Moses, restrain them!" But Moses said to him, "Are you angry on my account? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD put His spirit upon them!" Moses then reentered the camp together with the elders of Israel.

Numbers: 11:10-30

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For the past three years, the Combined Jewish Philanthropies, Boston's Jewish federation, has been creating and then implementing a strategic plan to provide new vision and direction for the second century of our federation and the new millennium of our American Jewish community. The process involved hundreds of volunteers and staff over many months and led to a detailed plan, including many new programs and a new set of priorities.

We learned several important lessons for today's struggle to define a new national system and a new national vision.

At the heart of this article and central to my own experience in Boston is a simple truth: Change is imperative and overdue. The old models simply fail to stand up to the demands of Jewish history or the truly amazing opportunities that the current dynamic situation of the American Jewish community presents.

"The time is short; the task is abundant;...the wage is great; and the Master of the House is insistent!"

To meet this great challenge, we must pay far greater attention to the development and articulation of a new vision—a new story—to stand at the heart of the new model. Not a new vision of more effective campaigning, though funds will surely be required to power and implement the new vision. Not a new programmatic vision, though new programs will surely be required to give life to the new vision.

Rather, what is required is a clear statement of our *raison d'être* as a community and as a people—a new "banner" for the American Jewish community.

We in Boston claim no pride of authorship. Before we started our strategic planning process, others were beginning to tell this story in scattered efforts in dozens of congregations and in the hearts and minds of thousands of Jews yearning for meaning and community. This is a story that is both post-modern, following a general disillusionment with certain aspects of modernity, and very old, rooted in our most ancient texts and our most sacred traditions.

Of course, it will not be enough to simply develop a new story for the American Jewish community. We will need to find and train volunteers and professionals who will lead by telling the new story. Howard Gardner, in his superb book, *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership*, describes the importance of the leader as storyteller, particularly in times of paradigmatic change:

The ultimate impact of the leader depends most significantly on the particular story that he or she relates or embodies and the receptions to that story on the part of audiences.... Leaders present a drama that unfolds over time, in which they—leader and followers—are the principal characters or heroes. Together they have embarked on a journey in pursuit of certain goals, and along the way and into the future, they can expect to encounter certain obstacles or resistances that must be overcome. Leaders and

audiences traffic in many stories, but the most basic story has to do with issues of identity. And so it is the leader who succeeds in conveying a new version of a given group's story, which is likely to be effective. Effectiveness here involves fit—the story needs to make sense to audience members at this particular historical moment, in terms of where they have been and where they would like to go.

TWO BANNERS AND TWO STORIES

The federation movement is a little over a hundred years old, and for the first seventy years of our existence, our "banner" and the needs of the American Jewish community were in sync. In spite of the birth of Israel in 1948, growing awareness of the Holocaust, and an ongoing concern for Jewish education, the focus of American Jewish life was thoroughly domestic and largely concerned with human services. The "banner" of our Federation movement read, "Let's become fully American: safe, secure, and prosperous!" In a word, our goal was assimilation. Our story was a tale of immigrants and *shtetls* and tenements; upwardly mobile peddlers and tailors; public school education and universities.

By 1965, some cracks had begun to develop in this consensus, and Abraham Joshua Heschel castigated the federation leadership at the General Assembly in Montreal. Even before the students began to march, Heschel told a story of young people disturbed by the spiritual emptiness of their parents' lives:

Our young people are disturbed at parents who are spiritually insolvent. They seek direction, affirmation; they reject complacency and empty generosity.

There is a waiting in many homes, in many hearts for guidance, instruction, illumination, a waiting, which is often intense, pressing, nationwide. So many are heartsick at the spiritual failure of our community...

To maintain devotion to Judaism, to succeed in the effort to convey my appreciation to my child, I need a community, as we all do. In this emergency we call upon the Federation: Help us!

We must create a climate of elucidation...of pronouncing our people's waiting for meaning...by discovering and teaching the intellectual relevance of Judaism, by fostering reverence for learning and the learning of reverence...

We need a revolution in Jewish life.

In 1967, the Six-Day War and Jewish American pride in Israel's heroism brought the era of assimilation to a close and ushered in the era of "sacred survival"—three decades focused on rescue and building the land of Israel. The words on the banner were now, "Join in the incredible opportunity of building the first Jewish State in 2000 years." International nation-building organizations like UJA became primary, and the vision of American Jewry turned overseas. We helped rescue Ethiopian and Russian Jewry, we went on missions to Israel, we marched and lobbied for Israel and Soviet Jewry, and we built Holocaust memorials and museums across the country.

Our new story was a story of heroism and pride. It was the story of Ari Ben Canaan in *Exodus*, and every American Jew on every mission to Israel felt like he or she was personally part of this great new story. Moreover, the new story connected to a stronger, prouder Jewish identity that was very much in sync with the larger American story developing in the late 1960s in which ethnic pride was becoming an accepted, even admired part of American culture.

In each of these shifts, the centrality of the federation movement depended on identifying the challenge correctly, helping create the new vision, and powerfully telling the new story. In each case, serious changes took place, and agencies were born, merged, and died, but the basic methodology remained the same—highly organized fundraising for human services. The most significant change was precisely the federation's ability to identify a new banner, powerfully tell the new story, and capture the imagination of the American Jewish community.

This is precisely the challenge we faced when we began our strategic planning pro-

cess. It is also the primary challenge faced by United Jewish Communities as it begins the process of self-definition and seeks the loyalty of the American Jewish community. If the federation movement is to maintain its centrality, it must ask these basic questions and in the answers create a new vision and a new banner.

- What will community mean in the twenty-first century?
- What does it mean to be Jewish?
- What do we stand for, and what are the learnings, ideas, and values that we want to transmit to our children?
- What kind of community do we want to leave for our children and grandchildren?

These are not simply Boston questions or even Diaspora questions. They are also critical questions for our brothers and sisters in Israel. The old Zionist story is losing some of its meaning for many Israelis, as the decline of anti-Semitism in the West is eroding one of its critical pillars. Israeli historians are questioning Israel's founding narrative. Most critically, the power of Western materialism is proving as seductive for Israeli as for American Jews. The hope that a Jewish calendar and Jewish rhythms alone would create powerful Jewish literature and culture and a new Israeli-Jewish identity is fading.

On the other hand, a new generation of Israelis are also beginning to search for spiritual meaning in their lives, and some are beginning the long, hard task of creating a serious, literate, non-fundamentalist, non-coercive Israeli version of Jewish spiritual/religious life to fill their lives with joy and meaning. While Israelis certainly have a proud history to teach their children, many also are beginning to understand the great national challenge that has increasingly troubled Israeli intellectuals and leaders: the need for a new/old vision that translates our great Jewish spiritual heritage into the passion, values, commitment, ideals, and visions that will be required by a new generation of Israelis as they help carry the Jewish story into the future.

A NEW VISION OF COMMUNITY: LEARNING, CARING, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

The Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP) Strategic Planning Committee began with a clear definition of community: "A group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it. Such a community is not quickly formed. It almost always has a history and so it is also a community of memory" (Bellah, R.).

Strong communities are built on common values and a common history, which together become the memory of the community. Strong values can develop only in the context of a genuine community. Without a powerful, meaningful, and inspiring vision of Jewish life, our institutions and communities cannot compete successfully for the hearts and minds of Jews who can now choose among hundreds of exciting and engaging alternatives available in the larger community. We must know what we stand for if we are to offer powerful options.

A set of core beliefs and an action agenda soon emerged from our strategic planning process: a clear consensus on the importance of developing a Jewish community around the basic values and principles of *Torah*—serious Jewish learning; *Chesed*—kindness, and caring for Jews in Boston, in Israel, and throughout the Diaspora; and *Tzedek—Tikkun Olam*—social justice and the possibility of a rebuilt world for our Jewish people and for all humankind. We would work to build communities of learning, of caring, and of justice.

Communities of Learning—*Torah*

A community that has no cultural, intellectual, or spiritual memory has no future. It has no stories to tell its children; no way to convey its values or its wisdom; no vehicle to convey its vision of good and evil, of greatness, or of degradation; of justice and righteousness or injustice and oppression. A community without memory is, in reality, no community at all.

Our American Jewish community is now facing Jewish cultural and intellectual amne-

sia. Plato and Aristotle are our friends and companions; Maimonides and Rashi are total strangers. Shakespeare and Homer are part of our cultural environment, but most of us cannot name the five books of the Hebrew Bible, or define the *Mishnah*, and its meaning in Jewish history. Most American Jews remain disconnected from Jewish culture and learning, unsure of its relevance, unconvinced of its usefulness, and unaware of its beauty or its spiritual power. Such a community cannot transmit its story to its children with the same passion and commitment it attaches to the secular educational enterprise.

In Boston, we have reached broad agreement about the need to vastly expand Jewish literacy and learning and facilitate a Jewish cultural renaissance through increased support for formal and informal Jewish education in day schools and congregational schools for people of all ages. We will give more attention to emerging institutions of Jewish culture. Most important, we will change our communal culture. Only if we truly believe in the importance of our communal memory, our Jewish culture, our Torah, and its ability to give our lives beauty and meaning can we diligently teach our children and create communities of Jewish learning. Expanding Jewish adult education and universal adult Jewish literacy are therefore key to the overall goal of building broad communal support for Jewish education.

Communities of Caring—*Chesed*

The creation of compassionate, face-to-face communities through which we care for each other—visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, aiding those in need—clearly represents a core agenda for Jewish life. This agenda also includes support for broader community-wide systems of caring such as those provided through our federation system of services here, in Israel, and around the world.

Communities of Justice—*Tzedek*

A Jewish community that focuses solely on its own needs ignores its most basic historical, biblical, and prophetic mandate. The pursuit of

Tikkun Olam, repairing the world, through social action is a third major strategic direction for community building. This value must guide our work to actively involve Jewish adults, college students, and teens in advocacy and service projects and building meaningful partnerships that bridge the gap between our largely suburban Jewish community and the city neighborhoods that surround us. This hands-on social justice work should be grounded in a particularly Jewish context, but should be applied universally.

The Community Matrix

The Jewish conception of learning, caring, and justice can only be realized fully in the context of strong, interdependent, "face-to-face" communities.

Learning, justice and caring are the point of Jewish life. They are the seeds of Jewish community. At the same time, Jewish communities are the ground within which these seeds must grow. Too often in the past, strategies for Jewish education/continuity have ignored the need for community, and strategies for community building have failed to understand that communities require culture, meaning, and purpose to flourish. A strategy that supports both must be at the core of the work.

Federations have a central role to play in community building, but cannot reach out to every Jew and cannot become a face-to-face community for any but a minority of committed volunteers. For the rest, the task of binding Jews to each other with caring, concern, and love and to systems of Jewish belief, Jewish learning, Jewish values, and Jewish doing belongs to *gateway* institutions, primarily congregations and Jewish Community Centers (JCCs). However, few of these gateway institutions are designed, organized, funded, or staffed to meet the special challenge of the 21st century. The role of the federation is to help provide the support, financial, and human resources, and the wide range of skills needed to help them become the strong, welcoming, learning, caring communities they want to be and can become.

At the core of our Boston strategy is a new

partnership with congregations designed to build on their strengths and overcome their challenges through highly targeted funding, training, support, and consultation. Of course, this new vision of federation/synagogue cooperation will require the complete, whole-hearted, and voluntary support of congregational leadership. That can only result from years of mutual relationship building between federation agencies and congregations and congregational movements around concrete objectives and new programmatic initiatives.

JCCs are better staffed and funded, but are frequently "consumer-oriented supermarkets" rather than meaning-oriented communities—a challenge being addressed by a reinvigorated Jewish Community Centers Association and in Boston through the JCC's innovative, "Meaningful Jewish Communities Initiative," which seeks to create a new story of community and meaning for Boston's JCCs. Both JCCs and synagogues will require new leadership with a new vision to fulfill our hopes and dreams for the future.

Inclusiveness and meaningful involvement must be the hallmarks of these renewed communities. We must reach out to and engage people from all backgrounds and experiences in Jewish communal life. The communities we envision will be open and welcoming to all. They will be respectful and tolerant of differences and the variety of ways people express their Jewish identity. They must be democratic in structure, foster engagement and commitment, and make the best use of the talents, intelligence, and ability of all their members.

A VISION AND A DREAM

Out of all this we extracted our Vision Statement—the heart of our new story:

We now have an historic opportunity to focus the great human energy of the Jewish people on creating a golden age of Jewish learning, culture, and spiritual engagement that will revitalize Jewish life today for ourselves and ensure a vibrant future for generations to come. To flourish and thrive, and to maintain its vital position as catalyst for change, CJP must com-

mit itself to building and strengthening vibrant, inclusive Jewish communities here and abroad, taking as its model a community described by Professor Arnold Eisen, "with Jewish values and learning at its core and social justice as its goal."

The Need for Leaders and Storytellers

The plan is now a year old, and change is already apparent in Boston. Communities are clearly being strengthened, and CJP is now visible in a positive way in more settings than ever before. But we are still a long way from achieving the critical mass of change that will be required to make our new vision irreversible.

The change process continues to lack the focus that can only be provided by leaders at the local level who can help envision the new community more effectively, for more audiences than ever before. This kind of leadership will be essential to help raise the resources needed while, at the same time, providing the community-building leadership needed at every gateway institution. To create the corps of leaders, we are at the beginning stage of planning a high-level leadership training center, perhaps linked to a local university, with national foundation support. The training institute and our JRNI (Jewish Resource Network Initiative) Project are designed to work with gateway institutions and with the federation and its agencies to develop the needed human resources and leadership required for this massive challenge. JRNI is the newly developed consulting arm of CJP designed to help congregations cope with change and new expectations through transformational structural change.

A Culture of Success

While many communities seem confused and embattled, concerned about assimilation and failing campaigns, lacking confidence in their congregations and agencies, we are feeling increasingly confident. While the new national system, the United Jewish Communities, is struggling to define its new agenda, we are increasingly clear about our goals and are

continuing to develop our story and project our vision.

We are already seeing success. Congregations and JCCs are implementing massive adult education programs through our joint Boston Hebrew College/CJP initiatives. Our *Me'ah* Program, offering two years of high-powered text-based learning to adults through each of our congregational gateways, is oversubscribed. It has attracted the best and brightest—opinion leaders and business executives and academics seeking to become as Jewishly literate and competent as they are in virtually every other area of human experience and knowledge. Over 1,000 Jewish Bostonians have already taken the program, and hundreds more are on waiting lists. The success of the program is beginning to change the intellectual *zeitgeist*, as well as the hopes and dreams of individual Jews. Similarly, our congregations, agencies, and Hillels are working through our Jewish Community Relations Council's innovative social justice programs to generate over 500 volunteers each week to provide hands-on services to disadvantaged populations as tutors in inner city schools and in a variety of other programs linking synagogues and inner-city churches. Hundreds of Boston volunteers are also actively involved in people-to-people projects overseas in Haifa and Dnepropetrovsk, revitalizing our overseas commitment while building community at home.

Change is happening because we are serious about implementing our plan, because we have begun to tell our story, because we have created strong respectful partnerships, and because the time is right. The spiritual revolution affecting all Americans is also affecting Jews. The Baby Boom generation is reaching the top of the hill, having achieved most of its material goals. It is asking fundamental questions: What does my life mean and what of real value can I give my children? How can I find the warmth of real community, and how can I leave a lasting mark on the world? To be relevant to the future, all the institutions of Jewish life, national or local, must provide answers to these questions. The danger, of

course, is that these yearnings will dissipate in spiritual fads and empty striving or deteriorate into narrow, isolated, and fundamentalist communities.

The challenge is to create a vision that binds these yearnings to real community; serious, non-fundamentalist, religious exploration; and the possibility of communal engagement in Tikkun Olam—the repair of the world. The new vision can and must integrate the needs of the Jewish people for meaning and spirituality with a new synthesis of American and Jewish values. It must synthesize, as every Jewish golden age has, the best of the surrounding culture and the best of our ancient spiritual, religious, and cultural heritage. For American Jews at the beginning of the 21st century this means a strengthened and renewed Judaism, rooted in a sure knowledge of our ancient and modern texts, and infused with American energy and a deep commitment to democracy, pluralism, and diversity. Out of this we hope to create a unique American Judaism deeply committed to our ancient traditions and our Jewish people worldwide and equally committed to the common good of all Americans and all humankind.

In Boston there is a broad consensus of support for our Strategic Plan, there is a growing understanding of our dreams for our Jewish future, and there is a yearning for a new story that a new American Jewish community can tell its children and grandchildren. In the words of our own late Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik:

How else can the community provide for the spiritual needs of its members:

The prayer community, it is self-evident, must at the same time be a charity-community as well. It is not enough to feel the pain of many, nor is it sufficient to pray for the many, if this does not lead to charitable action. Hence, Knesset Israel is not only a prayerful community, but a charitable community too.

The prayerful-charity community rises to a higher sense of communion in the teaching community, where teacher and disciple are fully united. The central figure in Jewish history has been not the king, nor the field marshal, nor the political leader, but the very old teacher surrounded by very young children. What does the teacher do? The teacher tells a story. We tell the children the story of laws, which form the foundation of Jewish morality; we tell them the story of honesty and sincerity, love and sympathy; this story is meant to teach the child not to steal, not to lie, not to be vindictive.

In short, it is an exciting story that we tell them. Our story unites countless generations; present, past, and future merge into one great experience....Our story tells of a glorious past that is still real, because it has not vanished, a future which is already here, and a creative present replete with opportunity and challenge. It is a privilege and a pleasure to belong to such a prayerful, charitable, teaching community, which feels the breath of eternity.

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