

# The Self-Renewing Organization

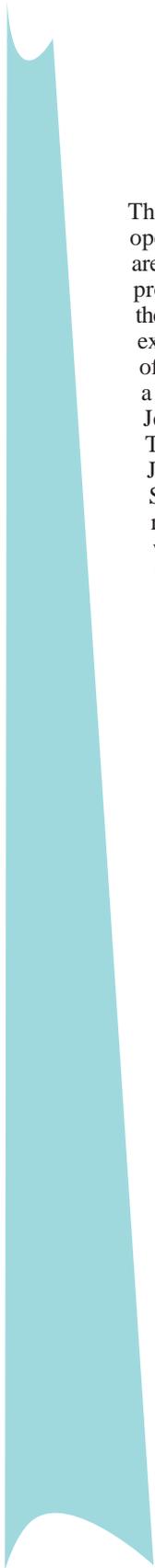
How Ideas from the Field of  
Organizational Development  
Can Revitalize Jewish Institutions

Isa Aron



Director General: Alan Hoffmann  
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**Isa Aron**

Response: Riv-Ellen Prell

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תשרי-חשון תשס"ג

# Introduction

The world has grown increasingly complex, or so it appears. The environments in which organizations operate seem to change more rapidly and more unpredictably than they have in the past. The people who make up our institutions - participants, supporters, and leaders - seem more diverse and individualist than their predecessors. The boundaries that separate religious groups, institutions, communities, and other social entities seem more porous and more fluid, with commensurate high rates of mobility in and out of these diverse social organisms.

What is true for the world at large, is true for Judaism, Jewish communities, Jewish institutions, and Jewish education. Rapidity of change, diversity, individualism, and fluidity all demand leadership and institutions that are more reflective, more adaptive, more collaborative, and, ultimately, more able to learn and re-learn new ways of thinking. Isa Aron's insightful essay, drawn from her years of experience as an educator of educators, and consultant to congregations and other Jewish educational institutions, expertly addresses these issues. She deftly describes the new sorts of challenges to Jewish educational leadership, and outlines the new ingredients of successful leadership to manage institutions best-suited for today's challenges. Based upon experience, observation, practice, and the application of the best of the theoretical literature on learning organizations and their leadership, Professor Aron articulates a provocative and compelling set of guidelines for successful Jewish educational and communal leadership.

Steven M. Cohen  
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## About the Author

Isa Aron is professor of Jewish Education at the Rhea Hirsch School of Education, HUC-JIR, in Los Angeles. She was the founding director of the Experiment in Congregational Education, a project of the RHSOE, and continues to serve as the senior consultant. The project works with congregations throughout the United States, helping them become both congregations of learners and self-renewing.

# Abstract

In a world which is changing rapidly, all organizations must learn to become more open to new ideas, more flexible in outlook, and more thoughtful in their policies. Senge and others have used the term “learning organization” to characterize institutions that engage in this continuous cycle of action and reflection. This paper describes them as “self-renewing” which emphasizes the reflexive and cyclical nature of the process, the fact that much of the learning is internal, and the point that the learning is incomplete without concomitant action.

The paper discusses four important capacities of the self-renewing institution. Each capacity enables the institution to do the seemingly paradoxical--to hold fast to both ends of an apparent dilemma. They are: (1) thinking back and thinking ahead: being both reflective and proactive; (2) enabling leaders to follow, and followers to lead: practicing collaborative leadership; (3) seeing both the trees and the forest: celebrating the diversity of the membership while maintaining a vision of a holistic community; and (4) honoring the past while anticipating the future: balancing tradition and change.

# The Self-Renewing Organization

## How Ideas from the Field of Organizational Development Can Revitalize Jewish Institutions

Isa Aron

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In their landmark study *The Jew Within*, Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen describe the fluid identities and commitments of American Jews in the following terms:

The principal authority for contemporary American Jews, in the absence of compelling religious norms and communal loyalties, has become the sovereign self. Each person now performs the labor of fashioning his or her own self, pulling together elements from the various Jewish and non-Jewish repertoires available, rather than stepping into an “inescapable framework” of identity...given at birth. Decisions about ritual observance and involvement in Jewish institutions are made and made again, considered and reconsidered, year by year and even week by week. American Jews speak of their lives, and of their Jewish beliefs and commitments, as a journey of ongoing questioning and development. They avoid language of arrival. There are no final answers, no irrevocable commitments.<sup>1</sup>

What can Jewish institutions do, Cohen and Eisen ask, to increase the chance that the commitments these Jews make (however tentative and however individualistic) are Jewish ones? Their answer takes the form of an analogy: Jewish institutions must learn to operate like transit systems:

Jewish institutions face a formidable task in this period of voluntarism and mobility. They must have a range of options available to every individual at every moment, so that when he or she is ready to seize hold of Jewishness or Judaism, the right option is there to be had. Jewish professionals more and more seem like the operators of a transit system. A bus must be ready and waiting at the bus-stop at the exact moment that the prospective Jewish rider appears. The fleet must be sufficiently large to be there whenever wanted, and it must be sufficiently diverse to take account of the diverse tastes and needs of its potential clientele.<sup>2</sup>

Institutions of an earlier era could afford to operate as fixed and stable destinations, secure in their mission and confident that Jews would seek them out. Jewish institutions today need greater fluidity and greater mobility. They must travel to their riders, providing the appropriate vehicle at the appropriate stop at the appropriate time. A tall order, but not impossible one; some Jewish institutions have learned to function in just this way. Throughout the Jewish world, there are exemplary synagogues, Jewish Community Centers, day schools, and membership organizations that have learned to adapt to new environments and new clientele while remaining true to their essential missions. For reasons that will be explained in the next section, I call these organizations “self-renewing.”

## **What is a Self-Renewing Organization?**

In the 1970s, with the birth of the field of organizational development, researchers began to study the changing fortunes of different institutions. Which corporations were able to adapt to changing economic conditions? Which schools learned to serve new, more diverse student populations, and to embrace new approaches to teaching and learning? What enabled some institutions to embrace new technologies and become technological innovators themselves? What led some to re-think their personnel policies and empower their workers?

As research into these questions accumulated, answers began to emerge. Some organizations, it seems, act more “intelligently” than others. They are open to new ideas, flexible in outlook, thoughtful in their policies, and therefore, better able to adapt to their changing environments. The wisdom of these organizations is different from, and not entirely dependent upon, the intelligence of the individuals within them. A group of smart, capable people working in isolation, or competing with one another, do not add up to a smart organization. The effectiveness of an organization is dependent on the synergy between its members.

Moreover, the “intelligence” of an organization is not a permanent characteristic. An organization that demonstrates acumen and resilience in one era may lose these capacities a few years later, as many organizations did. Thus, rather than using an adjective to describe what such an organization *is*, it seems more appropriate to use an adverb, which would emphasize what it *does*: it scans and interprets its environment in search of potential issues and problems; explores a range of possible new directions; takes action; assesses the outcome of its actions; and, without missing a beat, begins the cycle anew. This organization not only articulates its vision; it also monitors its progress toward that vision, and it is on the lookout for ways in which the vision is incomplete and in need of revision. In the words of Peter Senge, an organizational development consultant, this organization “is continually expanding its capacity to create its future.”<sup>3</sup>

Senge and others have used the term “learning organization” to characterize institutions that engage in this continuous cycle of action and reflection. I prefer the term “self-renewing,” which emphasizes the reflexive and cyclical nature of this activity, the fact that much of the learning is internal, and that the learning is incomplete without concomitant action. Based on research into synagogues and schools, the literature about organizations in general, and Jewish organizations in particular, and my ten years of experience as the director of the Experiment in Congregational Education, I have identified four important capacities<sup>4</sup> that these self-renewing institutions possess. Each capacity enables the institution to do the seemingly paradoxical—to hold fast to both ends of an apparent dilemma. The capacities are:

❖ Thinking back and thinking ahead: Being both reflective and proactive.

- ❖ Enabling leaders to follow and followers to lead: Practicing collaborative leadership.
- ❖ Seeing both the trees and the forest: Celebrating the diversity of the membership while maintaining a vision of a holistic community.
- ❖ Honoring the past while anticipating the future: Balancing tradition and change.

The sections that follow discuss each of these capacities.

### **Thinking Back and Thinking Ahead**

Imagine the following scenario:

*It is spring, and members of the JCC programming committee meet to review the calendar for the upcoming year. It looks a lot like last year's calendar, with holiday events, celebrations of Jewish Book Month, a dance festival, and a special concert series. A noted author will be coming to town, and they slot her in for a lecture. They wonder whether the dance festival should be held at all, since attendance was so low last year. They argue, as they do every year, about whether to offer cultural programs with only minimal Jewish content, and how much to charge for various events.*

*"You know it's difficult to me to make these decisions without a clear sense of our mission. What kind of Judaism are we promoting, and to whom?" murmurs a new member of the committee.*

*"Yeah, we keep saying we will discuss our mission, but somehow, we never get around to it," a veteran member responds.*

*"Didn't we agree to send out a survey to our membership?" asks a third. "And what happened to the idea of conducting focus groups?"*

*A survey and focus groups were indeed discussed, but the staff member who had been assigned these tasks left, and they somehow fell through the cracks. It is too late now to begin gathering this information, and no one suggests meeting again to discuss the JCC's mission. The committee takes its best guess as to what programs will be popular, finalizes the dates, and disbands.*

This committee has fallen into a pattern that is all too common in Jewish institutions. Focusing intently on the details of day-to-day management, the staff and lay leadership are left with little time or energy to reflect on larger, long-term issues. This tendency to ignore the big picture may seem puzzling at first. As individuals, the key players in Jewish institutions are, by and large, thoughtful and energetic. The professionals are conversant with many of the issues in contemporary Jewish life. Lay leaders are often accomplished in their fields. Yet, somehow, the whole adds up to less than the sum of its parts.

One reason for this is that Jewish professionals are perennially overworked; there is always another phone call to be returned, a hospital visit to be made, a discipline problem to be handled, a potential donor to be cultivated, an irate donor to be appeased, and so on. In the face of pressing day-to-day matters, long-range concerns invariably fade into the

background. The Jewish calendar itself may reinforce this tendency to live only in the present. Holidays, communal commemorations, and fundraising events come every year; no sooner does one end than it is time to plan for the next. Who has time to reflect on whether the programs just completed were appropriate or effective? Amidst the constant pressure, it is too tempting to repeat last year's events, whatever doubts one may have about their purpose or their effectiveness.

For their part, lay leaders are volunteers who balance numerous commitments, to work, to family, and often to other non-profit institutions. It is natural for them to want to act decisively and to be impatient with long discussions of the organization's mission and processes.

To get beyond the malaise created when problems are ignored and to prevent the mindless rush to a premature fix, an organization must deliberately cultivate its ability to be both reflective and proactive. The two capacities may appear to be in opposition. Being proactive carries with it connotations of jumping right in and *doing something*. Reflection, in contrast, requires that we pause and take stock. As individual decision-makers we often feel torn between thought and action; our interest in mulling things over gets in the way of our desire to act decisively. This conflict becomes more acute in organizations, when the conceptualizers who love to consider all the angles lock horns with the doers who want to see results. But reflection that does not culminate in concerted action is merely an academic exercise or an intellectual parlor game. Conversely, action without sufficient prior reflection is akin to taking a shot in the dark. These capacities are complementary. Reflection does not guarantee an intelligent, successful outcome, but it makes it possible for an organization to learn from its mistakes. And being proactive is the payoff which justifies the reflection—action taken in a timely fashion, before positions have become entrenched and opportunities lost.

What does it take for an organization to become more reflective and proactive? Both dedicated time and a conducive atmosphere are essential. A board or staff retreat is an excellent venue for the extended, freewheeling conversations that are difficult to sustain in the press of day-to-day concerns. But shorter periods of reflection can also be productive. For example, exercises that promote visioning and long-range thinking can be utilized. Text study is another vehicle for reflection; the discussions of sacred texts re-connect us with the core values of Judaism, reminding us of the reason for the organization's existence.<sup>5</sup>

Setting aside the time, creating an appropriate atmosphere, and helping people get in touch with larger issues and concerns are only the first steps in reflection. A break in the action creates the potential for new understanding and more intelligent decision-making, but that potential is only actualized when we acquire new information or explore new ideas. Our thought patterns tend to run along familiar, well-worn paths, unless we make a point of trying out different ones. To become more reflective, we need to deliberately adopt perspectives that are unfamiliar.

In his book *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Ronald Heifetz terms this practice “getting on the balcony.”

Consider the experience of dancing on a dance floor, in contrast with standing on a balcony and watching other people dance. Engaged in a dance, it is nearly impossible to get a sense of the patterns made by everyone on the floor....To discern the larger patterns on the dance floor—to see who is dancing with whom, in what groups, in what location, and who is sitting out which kind of dance—we have to stop moving and get to the balcony.<sup>6</sup>

How do we train ourselves to see things from the balcony? Heifetz proposes that we ask ourselves a series of questions, designed to lift us beyond our immediate reactions and provoke us to think differently. These questions include:

1. What’s causing the distress?
2. What internal contradictions does the distress represent?
3. What are the histories of these contradictions?
4. What perspectives and interests have I and others come to represent to various segments of the community that are now in conflict?
5. In what ways are we in the organization or working group mirroring the problem dynamics of the community?<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes a group engaged in reflection may get so caught up in talk that it finds itself unable to act. To prevent this from happening, it is important to balance reflection with proactivity. Being truly proactive means doing whatever it takes to see that a decision is made and that the decision is fully implemented. This requires overcoming both inertia and fear and taking careful, coordinated action. It might involve a move as simple as reminding people of their assignments or as complex as dealing with attempts to overturn or undermine the decision.

The need to balance reflection with action poses a formidable challenge for any organization, particularly one which depends upon a large numbers of volunteers. The challenge is more easily met when the leadership works collaboratively. This brings us to the second capacity of a self-renewing organization.

### **When Leaders Learn to Follow. and Followers Learn to Lead**

An increase in the level of reflection within a committee or board can have a powerful ripple effect. Over time, members of the group gain an appreciation for each other’s talents and perspectives, and (ideally) a tolerance for each other’s limitations and blind spots. They find that they can rely on one another to bring in new ideas, ask difficult questions, and keep the discussion from getting bogged down. The group develops a collective sense of responsibility, and a subtle shift in the balance of power occurs. The process of collaboration has begun.

Collaboration and reflection go hand in hand; each can serve as a catalyst for the other. In addition, collaboration gives an organization’s

leaders both the impetus and the courage to be proactive. But collaborative leadership doesn't come easily. Some people equate hierarchy with efficiency; they question whether more collegial relationships are worth the effort. Others like the idea of collaboration in theory, but they find it difficult to put the theory into practice.

Though many aspects of Jewish communal life have come under criticism in recent years, the hierarchical nature of leadership in Jewish organizations has gone largely unchallenged. For example, leadership programs for day schools and communal agencies are aimed at those in top positions; similarly, a number of synagogue change efforts focus almost exclusively on the rabbi. But Edwin Friedman, a rabbi and a psychotherapist who was one of the first people to apply systems theory to congregational life, argues that hierarchical leadership can be quite problematic. Though a powerful, charismatic leader can attract devoted followers, "The emphasis on the personality of the leader tends to personalize issues...with the result that emotions and issues become harder to separate from one another."<sup>8</sup>

Ronald Heifetz makes a similar point about charismatic and hierarchical leadership in any organization:

The lone-warrior model of leadership is heroic suicide. Each of us has blind spots that require the vision of others. Each of us has passions that need to be contained by others. Anyone can lose the capacity to get on the balcony, particularly when the pressures mount. Every person who leads needs help in distinguishing self from role and identifying the underlying issues that generate attack.<sup>9</sup>

The concentration of an organization's leadership in one individual, or in a small cohort of lay leaders, is problematic in other ways as well. Sensing that they are likely to be overshadowed or overruled by an inner clique, those in the outer circle may be loathe to volunteer their time. Potentially strong new staff members may decline positions or may leave after a few years. No one wants to feel that their contributions to an organization are unappreciated.

A dynamic leader or group can generate a great deal of enthusiasm for a proposed change, but when responsibility for the change rests on the shoulders of single leaders, or even small groups, that enthusiasm is contingent on the leaders' presence and can easily evaporate in their absence. For example, an educator with a great deal of personal charisma introduced a host of family education programs that generated a great deal of interest and excitement. But when the educator moved to a different city, the excitement wore off, and participation in the programs dwindled, because the organization as a whole had never solidified its commitment to family education. Research on changes in corporations corroborates this point; if the CEO is "the only visible champion" of an initiative, the initiative will fail when the CEO's attention turns, as eventually it must, to other matters.<sup>10</sup>

In the past fifteen years calls for a different model of leadership have come from the worlds of business, government, and education. Advocates for this new type of leadership have given it various names: “facilitative,”<sup>11</sup> “constructivist,”<sup>12</sup> and “adaptive.”<sup>13</sup> I have chosen the term collaborative as best expressing the notion that this type of leadership is rooted in a partnership—between different members of the professional staff and between lay and professional leaders in general.

Underlying these newer conceptions of leadership are a number of common themes:

1. Organizations and societies are never “finished”—rather, they are continually beset by problems and challenges.
2. These problems can be managed and even temporarily ameliorated, but they are never completely resolved; the management of organizational and societal problems requires a continual balancing act, a series of trade-offs.
3. The leader’s role is not to solve problems, but to help people to articulate and define them, and to weigh the pros and cons of a range of possible approaches.
4. Leadership, under these circumstances, requires facilitative skill, in bringing together diverse constituencies and both empowering and supporting them as they work together to articulate issues, explore the universe of possible responses, and reflect on their actions.

From this perspective, leadership is not a characteristic inherent in certain types of people or built into certain types of roles, but a set of attitudes and skills. In the words of Ronald Heifetz,

Rather than define leadership either as a position of authority in a social structure or as a personal set of characteristics, we may find it a great deal more useful to define leadership as an *activity*. This allows for leadership from multiple positions in a social structure....It also allows for the use of a variety of abilities depending on the demands of the culture and situation. Personal abilities are resources for leadership applied differently in different contexts....By unHING leadership from personality traits, we permit observations of the many different ways in which people exercise plenty of leadership every day without “being leaders.”<sup>14</sup>

From the notion of leadership as an activity of which many can and should partake, it is only a small step to the notion of leadership as residing in a group, rather than an individual. This conception of leadership has been put forth by William Drath and Charles Palus of the Center for Creative Leadership:

[Leadership is] the process of connecting people to one another and to some social activity, work, enterprise....[It is] that which creates commitments in communities of practice.<sup>15</sup>...The shift in viewpoint here involves moving from seeing the individual as the seat of leadership toward a view that the source of leadership lies in meaning-making in which all members of the community participate to some degree or another.<sup>16</sup>

The purpose of the process of leadership in this view is therefore not to create motivation; rather it is to offer legitimate channels for members to act in ways that will increase their feelings of significance and their actual importance to the community. The question for an individual in a position of authority is no

longer how to get people to do what is needed but how to participate in a process of structuring the activity and practice of the community so that people marginal to its practice are afforded the means to move toward the center of that practice. In other words, how can the contribution of each person in the community of practice be made increasingly important and increasingly appreciated for its importance?<sup>17</sup>

In Jewish institutions the case for collaborative leadership is even more compelling, for the mission of these institutions is not to sell a product or even to deliver a service, but to create communities that nurture and challenge their members. As Rabbi David Stern, of Temple Emanuel in Dallas, Texas, writes: “The idea of broadening and universalizing a sense of investment is vital.”

...the person at the top may be the least accessible person in the institution. If the vision is vested in the person who is hardest to get to, how are other people going to hear what the vision is? People who enter our congregation's communities enter through the outlying boundary. It's precisely the person at the outlying boundary who needs to know the vision. It's the congregant they see in the hall who is not an officer. It may be that the person who is there that day to pick up the sisterhood cookbook is the first person who articulates the vision for that person visiting.<sup>18</sup>

Collaborative leadership poses a challenge to anyone who has become accustomed to leading in a more hierarchical fashion. Rather than simply assessing a situation and taking action, the leader must become much more of a follower: practicing self-restraint, listening carefully, framing issues, and acting as a facilitator. Followers face difficulties of their own—overcoming feelings of intimidation, putting forth their own opinions and expertise, and taking initiative to “make things happen.”

The move from hierarchical to collaborative leadership is especially difficult in the rabbinate. For centuries, rabbis have been viewed as the ultimate religious authorities, and the rabbinate tends to attract people who expect to function as hierarchical leaders. Congregants, for their part, look to their clergy for definitive answers to questions of religion, morality, and even social and psychological concerns. Clearly, the biggest obstacle to collaborative leadership (in any setting) is the difficult work that both sides must undertake together: evolving a vision that is truly shared; clarifying roles in decision-making; and re-thinking the division of labor.

Those who have learned the arts of collaboration find that is well worth the effort. When more people are invested in thinking about the organization, the process of decision-making tends to be more thorough, and the decisions themselves more grounded.

### **Seeing Both the Forest and the Trees**

Jewish organizations see one of their main purposes as the creation of community. But community is a term with multiple meanings. It can refer to a large, amorphous collection of people (such as the “American Jewish community”) or a small, carefully defined entity (such as “a classroom community”), and to many types of groupings in between. Often the term

community is qualified by such adjectives as “face-to-face” or “genuine,” which imply that both size and the significance of the interactions between people are important. Social theorists who write about community focus on the nature of the relationships within it, the ties that bind members together. Drawing on this literature, I propose the following five criteria for the type of community that Jewish institutions try to create:<sup>19</sup>

An organization functions as a community when its members:

- ❖ share a common purpose
- ❖ value their membership as an end in itself, not just as a means to other ends
- ❖ have multiple, enduring, and significant personal contacts with other members
- ❖ accept the fact that there will be differences between them
- ❖ evolve procedures for managing the conflicts that inevitably arise

For large organizations, creating a sense of community will always be a challenge. But even small organizations find that there are enduring differences among their members: different understandings of what Judaism is and why being Jewish is important; differences related to age, income, and country of origin; differences in taste and intellectual and recreational interests; and, even within groups that are relatively homogeneous, differences in levels of involvement.

Alban Institute consultant Gilbert Rendle describes some of the ways in which churches have grown to accommodate the diversity of their members. His examples include: an Episcopal church whose vesper service begins with half an hour of yoga for those more comfortable with yoga than with vespers; a Methodist congregation that offers a new type of service to appeal to those congregants who grew up in the Roman Catholic tradition; and a congregation that has reorganized its governance structure to accommodate the busy lives of its younger members.

In each of these cases, and so many more, the congregations have had to break out of their boxes about how congregations live and work....There is still a tremendous amount of discomfort in these congregations as they wonder whether they have gone too far and “capitulated to the marketplace of people’s interests, and in the process diminished the practice of their faith....But change in these and a host of other congregations is a deep expression of their faithfulness”.<sup>20</sup>

What can organizations do to help their members get beyond a consumer mentality and coalesce as true communities? Rather than bemoaning the lack of commitment among their members, the organization’s leaders must take, as a given, that most have joined for personal instrumental reasons, and they must devise a strategy for what has been traditionally known as *keruv* - a Hebrew term that means bringing people closer, in this case to the Jewish Tradition and to one another.

Once it is identified as an explicit goal, there are numerous ways in which an institution can practice *keruv*. One congregation, for example, sponsored a series of get-togethers for new members. These sessions

included community-building mixers, interactive text study, and first-person testimonials from congregants involved in a variety of programs. Though at the outset only a small number of new members attended these sessions, they gradually became a part of “the way we do things around here,” and the meetings became a congregational norm that shaped people’s expectations and behaviors. Similarly, a number of day schools have found that in the year or two prior to a child’s bar or bat mitzvah, parents are particularly open to exploring their Jewish commitments and becoming engaged in Jewish activities. Capitalizing on this “teachable moment,” these schools have scheduled series of family education sessions with goals that go beyond bar or bat mitzvah preparation, to community-building and enabling parents to find a spiritual connection.

To create community an organization must begin to view every point of contact as an opportunity for *keruv*. Any occasion upon which people might show up for one purpose (parents’ orientation at a day school, for example or the culminating events at a day camp, or *Mitzvah* Day at a JCC) is an occasion to build community and demonstrate the richness of the organization’s offerings. This is not easy to accomplish because it requires the planners of these activities to take a holistic perspective. The principal of the day school and the director of the day camp may not welcome the additional assignment of creating a learning experience for parents, and the planners of *Mitzvah* Day may be overwhelmed by the thought of adding a cultural dimension to an already full and complicated event.

Organizations typically deal with large and complicated tasks by dividing them up, on the assumption that the component tasks can be accomplished in isolation from one another and require only loose coordination. Taking a more holistic, less fragmented approach requires considerably more planning and more staff time. This liability must be weighed against the potential benefit—the greater involvement of members, which, it is hoped, will create a larger pool of potential leaders and planners over the long run.

### **Honoring the Past While Anticipating the Future**

At a time when Jews can assimilate easily into the surrounding culture, Jewish organizations share the collective task of preserving and transmitting the Jewish heritage of their members. It is critical, therefore, for them to distinguish between the core Jewish *Tradition* (with a capital T) and *traditions* (with a small t) that are more peripheral, and therefore, more amenable to change. This is not an easy task, because Jews often become as deeply attached to traditions as they are to Tradition. For example, giving presents on Hanukkah (a tradition which developed in America, where Hanukkah became known as the Jewish equivalent of Christmas) often overshadows the Tradition of lighting the *hanukkiah*.

Making a clear distinction between Tradition and traditions is what gives integrity to the process of change; it enables us to maintain the unity of the Jewish people, through adherence to Tradition, while evolving traditions accommodate different aesthetic sensibilities and social conventions.

The challenges facing Jewish education today can be traced directly to the problem of mistaking traditions for Tradition. The Tradition is very clear that Jewish learning is a *mitzvah*, incumbent upon Jews of all ages. There is no such thing as “graduating” from Jewish study; to the contrary, it is incumbent upon us to learn and re-learn the same texts repeatedly. That is why we read the Torah on a yearly cycle, and why selections from the Torah and the Mishnah were woven into the formal liturgy where we would encounter them regularly. As Jews assimilated into American society, this Jewish view of learning receded in the face of a more Western approach: that learning is primarily for children and that once you have learned something, you have learned it “for good.”

As Jewish learning devolved into attending a Jewish school, the bar mitzvah ceremony, which was meant to mark the entry into Jewish adulthood, became, instead, a kind of graduation ceremony. But when Jewish learning ceases in early adolescence, Jewish adults are left impoverished. Memories that were once fresh become stale, and the rich fabric of knowledge and practice unravels. The fragments that remain are likely to be insufficient and even problematic. A child may be enthralled by a Bible story, but as an adult s/he is likely to wonder why there are contradictions or moral ambiguities in the text. Unaware of the ways in which these textual problems have been addressed by generations of commentators, adults may turn away from the Bible altogether. Children tend to think of God as an old man who sits up in heaven, and prayer as equivalent to making a wish. But to fully appreciate Judaism requires an adult conception of God and prayer. It is no wonder that adults whose Jewish education ended at bar or bat mitzvah often find themselves agnostic, and unable to pray.

Thus, organizations that aim to uphold the Tradition of learning must challenge the expectation that undermines it: that learning beyond bar mitzvah is optional. This, in turn, will involve some major cultural and structural shifts. It means breaking the expectation that all parents have to do is drop off their children off at school and building up a new expectation that everyone learns. It involves the creation of a variety of new learning opportunities, so that a wide variety of interests, needs and learning styles are accommodated.

### **Thinking about Change**

Later in this paper I describe some of the change initiatives that seek to re-introduce the Traditional conception of Jewish study, and I argue that some of these initiatives are more likely to succeed than others.

But first I need to explain what change entails. Change is an even more complicated notion than tradition. While it was necessary to distinguish between two kinds of tradition, there seem to be many more kinds of change. The growing literature on change makes some of the following distinctions: planned versus unplanned; evolutionary versus revolutionary; incremental versus transformational; first order versus second order;<sup>21</sup> and continuous versus discontinuous.<sup>22</sup>

At the Experiment in Congregational Education, we have found it useful to distinguish between two different dimensions of change. The first dimension refers to the scope of the change, from discrete, at one end of the continuum, to systemic, at the other end. The second dimension relates to the goal of the change, from a change in procedures, at one pole, to a change in outcomes, at the other. Charting a proposed change on a the matrix created by the two continua helps one see the change as only one among an array of alternatives. This is the first step in evaluating how appropriate the change is.

The differences between discrete and systemic approaches to change are analogous to the differences between “medical” and “wellness” approaches to illness and health. The medical model is reactive and specialized. One does not go to see a cardiologist unless one has a heart problem; a cardiologist is not expected to treat a patient for cancer, an ear infection, or a broken leg. In contrast, the wellness model is proactive, and it represents a holistic approach. An individual who is not exhibiting any symptoms might still be found to have a low blood count, which could indicate an impaired immune system; in a wellness approach the practitioner would take care to address this problem before it entered an acute phase. In addition, the wellness approach would look to the interconnections between different systems within the body, such as the way a broken leg might limit one’s ability to exercise, which, in turn, might affect one’s blood pressure.

As the examples suggest, there is merit to both of these approaches. They are best seen as poles on a continuum, rather than as mutually exclusive alternatives. In some cases a single, targeted treatment (such as an antibiotic for an infection or a cast for a broken bone) may be all that is needed; in other cases, it is critical to examine the wider effects of a treatment. Similarly, any organization that is thinking about change would do well to consider a range of possibilities, from isolated and self-contained to more pervasive and sustained. For example, discrete changes in governance are the most common because they are the easiest to accomplish. A typical example would be adding a new committee to address a new concern or an unmet need. But while any single new committee is likely to be beneficial, the cumulative effect of adding committee after committee as new needs arise might lead to a duplication of effort, or even outright conflict. Were that to happen, a more systemic change might be needed, such as a consolidation or reorganization of the committee system.

But what if this type of systemic change was not sufficient? What if the problem with governance was deeper than inefficiency or miscommunication? What if the committees themselves were ineffective, and important organizational functions were left to the professional staff, or went entirely unfilled? In this case, the purpose of the committees would have to be reconsidered, and the ways in which the committees were set up would have to be revised. This is where the second dimension of change comes in: the extent to which change introduces new ways to reach previously agreed-upon goals or represents actual revision of the goals themselves.

Despite the ways in which some organizational goals have changed over the past two decades, the natural tendency of most organizations is to focus primarily on procedures. Synagogues, in particular, tend to assume that their goals are timeless and to consider changes that are largely procedural. For example, congregations do not question whether or not Shabbat services should be held, only what their format should be. But things are not as simple as they might, at first, appear to be, and changes in goals are often worth considering. Re-thinking the purpose of Shabbat services could remind congregational leaders that the real goal is not to fill the sanctuary, but to help people celebrate Shabbat. This might lead to the realization that: (a) some services are more in keeping with the celebration of Shabbat than others; and (b) perhaps the synagogue ought to do more to help people celebrate Shabbat in their homes.

Laying out the two continua at right angles creates a matrix on which it is possible to plot changes, both actual and potential, as in matrix 1. The reality is, of course, much more dynamic than can be seen in a two-dimensional representation. A series of discrete changes can have a multiplier effect that leads to systemic change; and dramatic changes in procedures can serve as catalysts for a re-thinking of goals.

Congregational education is a good place to explore the interplay between changes in each of these quadrants. Most congregational learning takes place in the religious school that enrolls children in grades K–7. Between 20 and 80 percent of adolescents in grades 8–12 (the percentage varies greatly from one synagogue to another) are also enrolled in a formal or informal program. Beyond adolescence, the picture is considerably more bleak. In only a small number of congregations do more than 10 percent of the adults participate in some form of ongoing study, over and above the occasional family education or scholar-in-residence program.

Since woefully little research has been conducted in congregational schools, it is difficult to assess the quality of the learning that occurs there.<sup>23</sup> Anecdotally, what we hear are mostly complaints—that religious school is boring, that discipline problems abound, and that the children don't retain much of what they learn. As early as 1910, attempts were made to improve supplementary Jewish education.<sup>24</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, most of these efforts were limited to producing new

textbooks, devising new methods of teaching Hebrew, and improving both pre-service and in-service teacher education. As indicated in matrix 2, most of these efforts belong in the lower left-hand quadrant; in other words, they were discrete rather than systemic, and they tended to focus on procedures rather than goals.

Periodically, attempts were made by the denominational movements to introduce new curricula, spanning grades K–12.<sup>25</sup> When these curricula were used to review and revise the goals of the school (which happened to varying degrees), and when they encompassed the entire course of study, rather than the focus being on a particular subject or a particular grade, then the improvements were more systematic and more goal-oriented. But a new curriculum is only as good as the teachers who use it; in the absence of effective teachers, these curricula did little to improve the overall education of children. After the initial fanfare that followed their introduction, most were relegated to the storage closet. Notable exceptions were the Bible, holiday, and Hebrew curricula produced Melton Research Center, at the Jewish Theological Seminary. These curricula were supported by both initial teacher training and continued professional development.<sup>26</sup> However, even a new curriculum and better-trained teachers were not sufficient to improve most congregational schools since there was little community support for these schools. As long as parents conveyed to their children (explicitly or implicitly) that religious school was not worth taking seriously, the resultant problems with attendance and discipline undermined the best efforts of curriculum writers and teacher trainers.<sup>27</sup>

It is not surprising, therefore, that beginning in the 1970s educational professionals latched onto family education as a potential solution. This represented an important advance in people's thinking. No longer were synagogue leaders content to improve the education of children through procedural changes; they now wanted to expand the goal, to include educating the parents as well. Unfortunately, many of the earliest initiatives in family education tended to be discrete, rather than systemic. For example, a 1988 study by the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York concluded with a recommendation that a family educator be added to the staff of each school.<sup>28</sup> Projects such as Boston Federation's *Sh'arim* and the Koret Synagogue Initiative provided funding for family educator positions. But when family education was delegated to the family educator, in isolation from the rest of the synagogue staff, it tended to devolve into a series of one-shot programs and had little impact on the overall ambiance and effectiveness of the school.<sup>29</sup> When, on the other hand, the planning of a new family education program brought lay and professional leaders together and challenged them to think more deeply about how they could transform the lives of the families involved, it served, in the words of researchers Susan Shevitz and Deborah Karpel, as "a catalyst for change" in both the school and the synagogue.<sup>30</sup>

From a more systemic, goal-oriented view of family education, it was but a short step to a more radical re-thinking of the congregational school as a whole. By the mid-1990s, some new models of the religious school began to spring up. One of these was the Shabbat Community, bringing parents and children together on Shabbat morning or afternoon to learn and worship. Another model, the Family Havurah, places primary responsibility for Jewish education in the hands of parents, offering them such resources as book lists, study guides, *tikun olam* projects, orientations to worship, holiday workshops, the guidance of a mentor, and family *havurot* to join. Still another model, Congregant-Led Explorations, involves parents (as well as many congregants who do not have children in the religious school) as teachers of a series of hands-on, experiential “explorations” for the entire congregation.<sup>31</sup>

In evaluating these efforts, one would need to consider their impact on the students, their parents, and the synagogue as a whole. Are students sufficiently challenged? Are they engaged in their learning? Do they retain what they have learned? Does the experience lead parents to become more involved in Jewish life in general and in other synagogue activities in particular? And what has been the effect of the program on the congregation as a whole? Has it created a new cadre of lay leaders? Has it led to greater collaboration in other aspects of synagogue life? Has it inspired the congregation to approach any of its other activities differently?

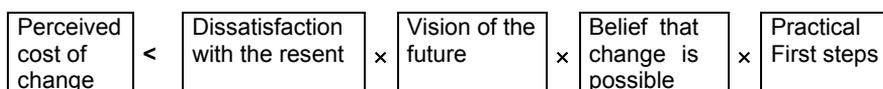
While there have been no careful studies conducted that would answer the questions about students and their parents, it is clear that each of the new models had an important effect on the larger congregational system. At Beth Am Israel, a Conservative congregation in suburban Philadelphia, the Beit Midrash (one version of the Shabbat Community) led to a major change in the way the congregation approached adult learning, including the recruitment of congregant-teachers, and the creation of a Learning Council to coordinate all of their offerings. At Congregation Beth Am in Los Altos Hills, a slightly different model, the Shabbaton program, led the lay leadership to request that the staff create a curricular map for adult learning, which led to a significant expansion of adult learning opportunities and the hiring of an adult learning coordinator. At Westchester Reform Temple, the success of Sharing Shabbat (yet another variant of the Shabbat Community) fueled efforts to re-think and reconfigure both the post-*b'nai mitzvah* program and worship.

As these examples suggest, systemic, goal-oriented change is contagious. New thinking in one part of the organization inspires new thinking in other areas; and when a range of stakeholders are energized by their experience as planners, it becomes easier to recruit additional people for the next planning effort. In such a climate, changes that are more discrete and procedural can also play an important role, as stepping stones to and harbingers of the larger changes that are yet to come.

What enables an organization to institute changes that are systemic and goal-oriented? Is it simply a matter of serendipity, of the right people being in the right place at the right time? Can one right person go about finding additional people, and, by dint of effort, make this the right time? In other words, how can a group of leaders set about to deliberately bring about holistic and enduring change?

Some of the answers to this question have already been given. First, this group of leaders must become reflective and proactive, able to think incisively about the past, the present, and the future. Second, this group must learn to work collaboratively. Third, this group must take into account the diversity of needs, interests, and viewpoints within the organization and articulate a vision that will unite the various constituencies despite (or perhaps because of) their diversity. All of these capacities can be deliberately nurtured, as I have endeavored to explain.

The capacity to change can also be nurtured, if one understands the various factors that contribute to its success. These factors can be encapsulated in a formula that I learned from organizational consultant Robert Weinberg, who currently serves as the director of the Experiment in Congregational Education:



As Weinberg is fond of pointing out, in multiplication any factor (no matter how large) multiplied by zero yields a product of zero. In other words, the formula suggests that if any one of these factors (dissatisfaction, vision, belief in the possibility of change, and rudimentary effort) is non-existent, the cost of change will always be too great, and the change will fail to take root. That is the bad news. The good news is that one can compensate for the small size of any given factor by increasing the size of the others.

On the other hand, however large the product of the four elements on the right side of the formula, a change will be resisted if its perceived cost is even larger. Some of the costs of change are obvious: change takes time and energy, which often requires additional staff, which costs money. Any Jewish institution contemplating change must realize that its current staff, which is probably already overburdened, will be unable to make the change happen unless its current work load is reduced.

In contrast to the tangible costs of change, the perceived costs are more subtle, and more difficult to contend with. However appealing they may seem to their sponsors, proposals for change frequently encounter considerable resistance. In the words of Michael Fullan: "If there is one cardinal rule of change in human condition, it is that you cannot *make* people change. You cannot force them to think differently or compel them to develop new skills."<sup>32</sup> The literature on change is replete with examples

of changes that were introduced with great fanfare, only to be sabotaged by those within an organization who found them threatening.

Resistance to change is especially common in Jewish organizations. Members confuse traditions with Tradition, and they are especially attached to the traditions with which they grew up. To counteract and reduce this resistance, it is helpful to consider those aspects of change that are likely to be psychologically unsettling. Psychologist and organizational consultant William Bridges distinguishes between *change*, which refers to an *objective event*, and *transition*, which is a *subjective perception*.

*Change* is situational: the new site, the new boss, the new team roles, the new policy. *Transition* is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation...Unless *transition* occurs, *change* will not work...Psychological *transition* depends on letting go of the old reality and the old identity you had before the change took place.<sup>33</sup>

Bridges likens the transition period to a neutral zone, a kind of psychological no-man's-land between the old and the new.

One of the most difficult aspects of the neutral zone for most people is that they don't understand it. They expect to be able to move straight from the old to the new. But this isn't a trip from one side of the street to the other. It's a journey from one identity to the other, and that takes time.<sup>34</sup>

Those who initiate change, Bridges counsels, should take care to help people anticipate the transitions, and support them throughout their journey through the neutral zone.

### **Balancing the Four Tensions**

Each of the capacities discussed in this paper—being both reflective and proactive; leading in a collaborative way; creating community while preserving diversity; and promoting change while honoring Tradition—entails a balancing act for the leadership of an organization. This balancing act can be compared to a game of “parachute.”

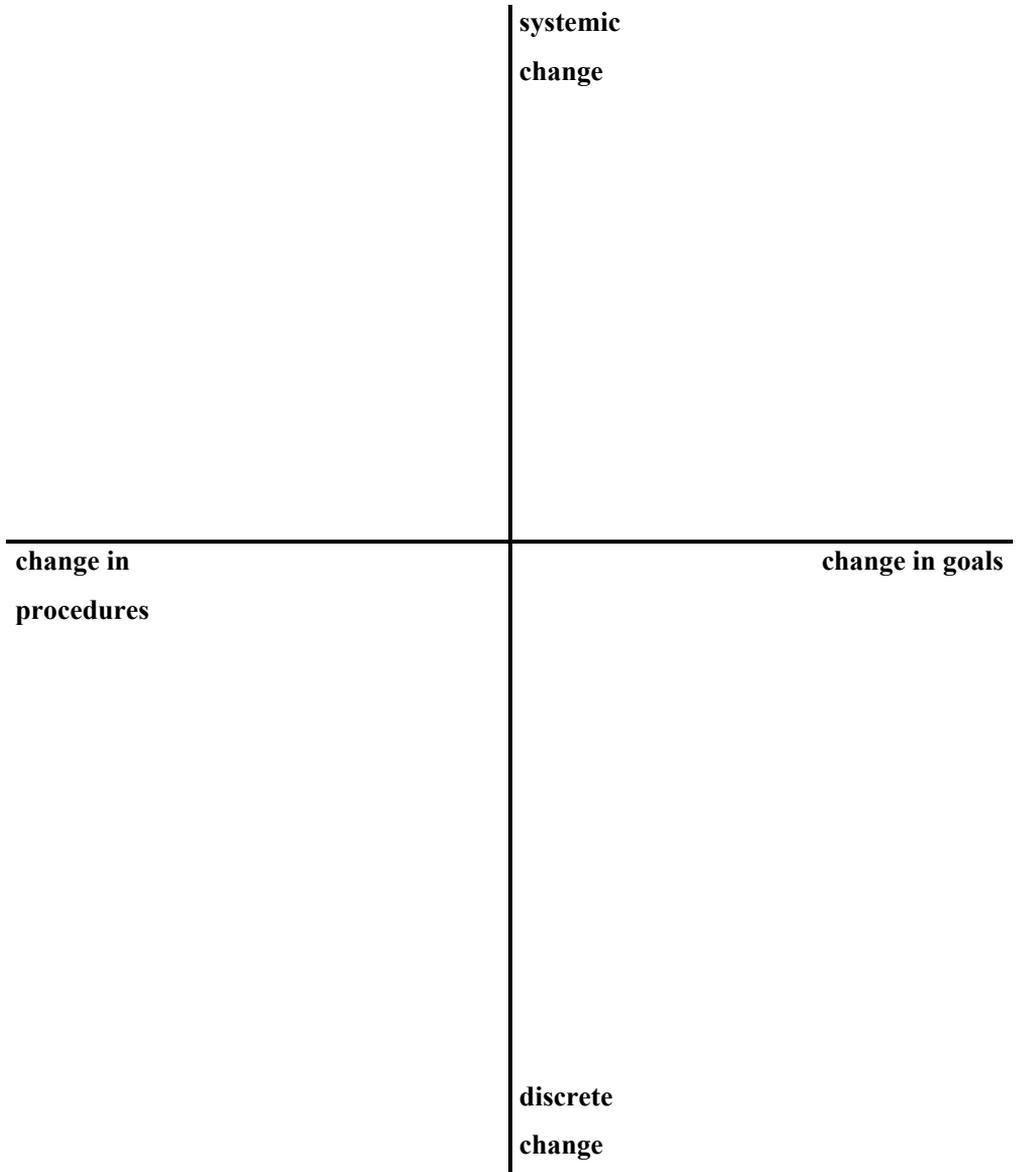
In “parachute,” individuals stand in a circle grasping the edges of a parachute trying to prevent a ball in the center from escaping. When the tension around the circle is balanced, the ball bounds higher and higher. But as people invariably shift positions, loosening and tightening their grasp with sudden pulls and jerks, the ball leaps off the stretched fabric and skips to the ground.<sup>35</sup>

A new group of players is likely to lose the ball quite a few times before it succeeds in hoisting the ball into the air. Having players of different height, weight, strength, and agility makes the task even more difficult and leads some players to give up. But the elation that accompanies the first success can motivate everyone to try again. With practice, the players can learn how to coordinate their efforts, raising the ball higher and higher.

Working to revitalize an organization is much like playing a game of parachute. In the beginning it may feel strange and difficult. After a while, people begin to grasp, both intuitively and analytically, how to maintain an appropriate tension. Through reflection and collaboration, they learn how

to make the differences between them work in their favor and how innovation can enhance Tradition and Tradition enhance innovation. Like the ball, their progress will have its ups and downs. Over time, both the process itself and the innovations it yields will reward them many times over.

**Matrix 1**



## Matrix 2

<p style="text-align: center;">Melton curricula + teacher training</p> <p style="text-align: center;">new curricula for existing school</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>systemic change</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">new models of religious school</p> <p style="text-align: center;">family ed. integrated into synagogue</p> <p style="text-align: center;">curricularized adult learning</p> <p style="text-align: center;">more extensive family ed.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>change in procedures</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">avocational teacher training</p> <p style="text-align: center;">improved pre- service and in- service training</p> <p style="text-align: center;">new textbooks and teaching methods</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>change in goals</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">stand-alone adult and family programs</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>discrete change</b></p>

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<sup>1</sup> Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family and Community in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank Miriam Heller Stern for suggesting the term “capacity.”

<sup>5</sup> Guides to these kinds of exercises and text study sessions can be found in my book *Becoming a Congregation of Learners* (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 252–253.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>8</sup> Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford Press, 1985), p. 226.

<sup>9</sup> Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, p. 268.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony DiBella and Edwin Nevis, *How Organizations Learn* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1998), p. 75.

<sup>11</sup> David Conley and Paul Goldman, “Ten Propositions for Facilitative Leadership,” in *Reshaping the Principalship*, ed. Joseph Murphy and Karen Seashore Louis (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Linda Lambert, et al., *The Constructivist Leader* (New York: Teachers College, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>15</sup> Wilfred Drath and Charles Palus, *Making Common Sense: Leadership as Meaning-Making in a Community of Practice* (Greensboro, N.C.: Center for Creative Leadership, 1994), p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>18</sup> This quote is from a talk given by Rabbi David Stern at the 1999 Biennial of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in Boston. A transcript is available from the author (pp. 11–12).

<sup>19</sup> Adapted from a definition of community offered by Fred Newmann and Donald Oliver in “Education and Community,” *Harvard Educational Review* (winter 1967), p. 64.

<sup>20</sup> Gilbert Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregation* (Alban Institute, 1998), pp. 97–98.

<sup>21</sup> See Larry Cuban, “Changing Public Schools and Changing Congregational Schools,” in *A Congregation of Learners*, ed. Isa Aron et al. (New York: UAHC Press, 1995); and Robert Evans, *The Human Side of School Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996).

<sup>22</sup> David Nadler, et al., *Discontinuous Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> The one large-scale evaluation of what is learned in congregational schools, conducted by the New York Board of Jewish Education, is seriously flawed because it treated cross-sectional data as longitudinal. Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York, *Jewish Supplementary Schooling: A System in Need of Change* (New York: BJE, 1988). Only anecdotal evidence of achievement was used to select the schools profiled in the Council for Initiatives’ Best Practices project. Barry Holtz, “Best Practices Project: The Supplementary School” (Cleveland: Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education, 1993).

<sup>24</sup> Mordecai Kaplan and Bernard Cronson, “A Survey of Jewish Education in New York City,” in *Jewish Education in the United States: A Documentary History*, ed. Lloyd Gartner (New York: Teachers College Press, 1909/1969). At the time, there were no day schools, but much of Jewish education took place under communal or private auspices. Congregational schooling became the norm after World War II, when Jews moved to suburbs; even today, communal *talmud torahs* remain, though they usually operate in close cooperations with congregations.

<sup>25</sup> For more information on these efforts, see Isa Aron, “From the Congregational School to the Learning Congregation: Are We Ready for a Paradigm Shift?” in *A Congregation of Learners*, ed. I. Aron et al. (New York: UAHC Press, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of these curricula, see Ruth Zelenziger ... and Joseph Reimer in Holtz, *Best Practices Project*.

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<sup>27</sup> This point was made most forcefully in three different studies: David Schoem, *Ethnic Survival in America: An Ethnography of a Jewish Afternoon School* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1989); Susan Shevitz in *Studies in Jewish Education*, vol. 3, and Reimer (Mandel paper).

<sup>28</sup> Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York, *Jewish Supplementary Schooling: A System in Need of Change* (New York: BJE, 1988).

<sup>29</sup> See Amy Sales et al., *Sh'arim: Building Gateways to Jewish Life and Communities* (Boston: Commission on Jewish Continuity, 2000); and Joel Streicker, *Program Development and Synagogue Growth: An Assessment of the Koret Synagogue Initiative* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University, 1997).

<sup>30</sup> Susan Shevitz and Debbie Karpel, *Sh'arim Family Educator Initiative: An Interim Report of Programs and Populations* (Boston: Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Boston, 1995).

<sup>31</sup> For more information on this model and others, see Sh'ma... and the ECE website ([www.eceonline.edu](http://www.eceonline.edu)).

<sup>32</sup> Michael Fullan, *Change Forces*, p. 22.

<sup>33</sup> William Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1991), pp. 3–5.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>35</sup> Pamela Grossman et al., "Toward a Theory of Teacher Community," *Teachers College Record* 103 (2001): 952.

## Response

To Isa Aron

### Riv-Ellen Prell

University of Minnesota

Professor Isa Aron's essay provides a concise and thoughtful summary of leadership and organizational change in Jewish life that is anywhere available. She offers an approach to communal life--whether it is in a JCC, a synagogue, or a school--that is visionary, attentive to diversity, and that encourages active participation of members. Her discussion of the key elements of leadership, that it is reflective and collaborative, not only makes organizational sense; it makes Jewish sense. Jewish organizations that embrace an organizational vision of leadership that is reflective, diverse, and process-oriented will create communities in which Jews will become self-conscious actors in their own Jewish lives.

Given my work as a scholar interested in American Jewish cultural history and identity and culture, Aron raises a particularly compelling issue. She asks what is the relationship between an organizational structure and the ideas and values which it advances? How are communal Jewish norms (rather than individual choices and decisions) integrated into the leadership and organizational structure of the institution?

Many of these issues can best be summarized in Aron's differentiation between Tradition and tradition. Normative Jewish **Tradition** ideally creates parameters for Jewish community and values. Unquestionably, however, **traditions**, remain far more powerful in liberal Jewish denominations. Whether it determines the sort of Jewish education parents will tolerate, or the way synagogue boards are organized, or the design of a boutique liturgy that is created by each bar or bat mitzva, most Jewish organizations do not simply mistake tradition for Tradition. To the contrary, the history of American Jewish life reveals Jews' preference for their own traditions over Tradition. Tradition, with its links to halakha, to obligation, and to communal norms, has not fared well in the United States in the twentieth century.

Isa Aron's essay acknowledges a cultural shift in the United States that has changed the environment in which Jewish organizations function today. A cultural and organizational orientation to shared leadership, as well as an uncontested erosion of acceptance of authority have deeply affected Jewish practice and Jewish communal life in the United States. I want to suggest that it is interesting to explore the ways in which this cultural transformation informs and shapes the persistent tension between ideology (traditions) and organizational life. Tracking this cultural-historical change and the tensions between world view and institutions provides one

context in which to recognize the challenge Aron's essay provides for creating Jewish community and commitment.

### **Post War Synagogue Leadership**

We often think of the immediate post war period and the birth of the suburban synagogue as one in which traditional authority relations were as hierarchic and normative as the gender roles of the time. In fact, if the publications of this era are reliable, the suburban synagogues were in some senses radically democratic. Their members were those who first moved to suburban settlements. Young families, many of whose husband/father had served in World War II, were eager to create new types of communities. The much remarked upon "conformism" of the period was reflected in the fact that congregants were likely to live in similar homes, drive similar cars, and have similar incomes. That "conformism" certainly encouraged synagogue membership and paradoxically created opportunities for activism and leadership.

Many suburbanites joined a synagogue for the first time. Others happily fled older urban synagogues whose hierarchy and established elite excluded younger members from any role in leadership. These synagogue rabbis were often themselves young, and, recruited members of their own age and made them leaders as quickly as possible.

The periodicals of the era, albeit reflecting activists within organizations, describe a heady time of creating new institutions designed to respond to an optimistic moment in American Jewish life as well as in the lives of these young families.<sup>i</sup>

Did new suburban synagogues and temples employ traditional and hierarchic forms of leadership? That is not clear. But the business of synagogue life was clearly oriented to establishing institutions, building a presence in new areas of settlement for Jews, and of course, socializing children into a Judaism that was still being defined in this period. There was of course a good deal of gender segregation in leadership, but that did not deny women leadership roles, simply ones lower in the hierarchy.

Both scholars and leaders of the period commented upon the lack of ideologies. Even as Conservative and Reform denominations were centralizing and expanding everything from youth groups to lay leadership, they were not elaborating strong ideological, or for that matter, theological positions for membership.<sup>ii</sup> However, the absence of such ideologies did not mean that these men and women lacked shared values or ideas about their lives.

In addition, American Jews were remarkably homogeneous in this period of time. They continued to populate a relatively small numbers of regions, cities, and neighborhoods in great numbers. The movement of many Jews into the middle class occurred during this period. Their embrace of middle class ideology and suburbanization led to similar configurations of family (few children), a gendered division of labor

(women tended to stay at home with young children), work (increasing professionalization and business,) and many other factors.<sup>iii</sup>

Young suburbanites might well have come from rather different Jewish backgrounds--secular radical or religious. Suburbanization was tied to a different version of Jewishness in all cases. For these Jewish suburbanites, synagogues became the paradigmatic institution of Jewish suburbia because they advanced a commitment to maintaining a Jewish identity within the context of a plural American society.<sup>iv</sup>

### **Changing Synagogue Organizations**

This mix of fairly egalitarian leadership and strongly shared values was of course to change. Research on synagogues is sparse in general, and the synagogues of the late 1950s and 1960s, in particular, have not been a topic of study as of yet. What we do know is that with the rise of the American Counter Culture in the 1960s and a Jewish Counter Culture shortly thereafter, the suburban synagogue was attacked for its ineffectiveness and its membership fell, as did most religious organizations in America. At best, the suburban synagogue of the 1960s was considered bland. At worst it was judged a waste-land.<sup>v</sup>

Clearly the heady democracy of early suburban synagogues had given way to the inevitable hierarchies, which developed as organizations add second and third generations. Unquestionably, growing Jewish wealth and the financial demands of synagogues contributed to boards and politics that reflected the importance of wealthy members. Suburban synagogues, it is clear, began to reflect the same hierarchical structures of the urban synagogues of a previous generation. It appears that this was not a moment of reflective leadership, effective democracy or well elaborated visions for Jewish life. Rather, the openness and innovation of the late 1940s and early 1950s gave way to non-egalitarian and highly undemocratic synagogue organization.

Synagogue hierarchies were parallel to those found in federations where a religious outlook was not even assumed. There was little pretense to democracy and the importance of wealth largely determined leadership. The synagogue and the federation were both targets of critique and protest for sharing many of the same sins--a lack of democracy and a vision of Judaism or Jewishness that was tied to middle class American culture.

### **The Counter Culture and its Impact on Organizations**

The American counter culture advanced a fundamental attack on those traditional institutions and relationships of authority. It viewed the institutions of those post war suburbanites as sterile, ineffectual, and lacking in meaning.

It was a cultural revolution in the United States that introduced all sorts of changes into Jewish organizational life and laid the groundwork for the undermining of hierarchic authority about which Professor Aron wrote.

The Jewish counter culture was critical of a lack of active participation in one's own religious life, in learning, and in leadership. This external change was often threatening to institutions, but in the end I believe enormously important for the transformation of American Jewish life.

This cultural change had the same effect on Jews that it did on many other aspects of American cultural and political life. It was polarizing and attacked the new synthesis developing in the 1950s and hardened in the 1960s. It reconfigured Judaism as a religion, opening the doors to greater observance on the one hand, and more innovation on the other. As other Americans also experienced significant declines in conventional religious practice and belief in the 1960s, only to rebound in the late twentieth century, so to have Jews.

The members of the Baby Boom generation, for the most part, abandoned Judaism during their college years. But that same generation also produced Jewish activists who were particularly critical of synagogues for their lack of a more fully realized ideology. They wanted Judaism to critique the dominant culture rather than embrace it. They created alternative institutions and sought new ways to organize communities and to challenge professionalization of leadership.<sup>vi</sup>

### **The Challenge of Tradition**

This brief overview of two decades of Jewish organizational life illumines Aron's essay because it suggests that organizational life changed within the decades following World War II and allows us to look at their connections to ideology and traditions. Drawing on Aron's ideas about leadership as we look back on those decades helps us to understand the complexity of creating a vital Jewish communal life. It is not simply the problem of whether leadership is inclusive or not, or whether there is innovation or not. Rather, the relationship between ideology, traditions, and organizational structures is what is central. We might ask if these decades have anything to teach us about what makes leadership vital and organizations thrive.

Highly democratic new congregations in the 1950s were inclusive. They were building for the future. It was the very ideology and values they shared--institutional growth and fighting for inclusion in the American middle class--that might have worked against the need for fully developed "Jewish" ideologies and reflective leadership. What early suburban synagogues illustrate are the ways in which shared leadership still requires a self-conscious elaboration of ideology and a consideration of its effect. The rapid change in the synagogue--toward less democratic leadership--might well have been anticipated. The lack of attention to a vital Judaism that was so closely enmeshed with middle class American life might have allowed synagogues to pay more attention to "religious" life. The relationship between an American Jewish ideology and Tradition were simply not well worked out.

With hindsight (which is always arrogant) we can see that suburban synagogues paid insufficient attention to shaping a vision or ideology that put Jewish practice at the center. In contrast, the hyper self-consciousness about innovation and experimentation in the late 1960s had its own blind spots. An ideology that emphasized change developed as synagogues' bid for relevance and vitality. All sorts of experiments by institutions to hold onto members in the face of radical cultural challenges may have led to a hyper self-consciousness that lacked reflection and a clear evaluation of goals. Mimeographed synagogue services that changed each week, embracing folk songs rather than liturgy, changing seating arrangements and literally hundreds of other experiments were exciting because they challenged often sterile religious experiences. Some disappeared and some continued to evolve.

If these changes came about as a result of new leadership, shared leadership, or institutional change is something about which little is written. The decade of the 1970s was a period in which both greater Traditionalism and the creation of a multitude of traditions really began. That polarization, in contrast to the shared agenda for Jews of the early 1950s is important. It clearly demands a greater self-consciousness about organization and leadership outlined by Aron.

How to integrate the commitment to Tradition with the democratic concerns for leadership is, I believe a critical question. The most traditional institutions in Jewish life are not bastions of democracy. The most egalitarian institutions are often not traditional. In a cultural moment when Jews share less and less, and when a Jewish communal "vision" may not be necessarily connected to Tradition, all Jewish organization are challenged. Some of us may yearn for the traditional authority structures on which traditional Judaism depended for generations and others might remember the brief era of suburban democracy fondly. Neither of these models will inform the majority of Jewish experience in the 21st century in America. We are stuck with the challenging problems of negotiating the complexity of democratic organizations linked to Traditional Judaism.

What is promising about Isa Aron's ideas about how to organize and empower leaders and change is the balance she offers between understanding what creates well functioning organizations and the importance of Tradition. There seems little point in creating Jewish organizations that are not self-consciously Jewish. And that Jewishness cannot, to my mind, be tailored to small groups of families or individuals. It must exist within community and its leaders must make a critical part of their leadership the recruitment of people to those commitments.

Over the latter half of the twentieth century a remarkable transformation occurred in Jews lives in the United States. They went from the nation's margin to its center. There were understandable reasons that post war Jewish institutions attended to institutional growth and cultural change, and that the needs of the community were so evident that an ideology or vision was not well articulated. The excesses of Jewish life in

the 1960s, both its extreme acculturation and radicalism, speaks to the conflicts created by a new acceptance by the dominant society.

Our own situation is radically different. The revolution that has opened the way to rethink leadership and change is, as Isa Aron suggests, in service of creating vibrant Jewish organizations. I worry about the loss of Tradition in this radically pluralist moment. Aron's work challenges us to understand how to succeed at the task at hand: to realize that vital institutions depend on deliberative and democratic leadership, and that Tradition holds a different place in the deliberative process.<sup>vii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Abraham A. Fleischman "The Urban Jew Goes Suburban." The Reconstructionist, March 6, 1953; David I. Golovensky. "In Defense of Country Club Judaism." Conservative Judaism. November 9, 1953; "The Rabbi Asks." CCAR Journal, January, 1961, Jacob P. Rudin. "The Character of the Suburban Temple." CCAR Journal April, 1955.

<sup>ii</sup> Jeffrey Gurock; "From Fluidity to Rigidity: the Religious Worlds of Conservative and Orthodox Jewish in Twentieth Century America. Jean and Samuel Frankel Center of Judaic Studies. U of Michigan. 1998. Abraham A. Fleischman "The Urban Jew Goes Suburban." The Reconstructionist, March 6, 1953;

<sup>iii</sup> For a discussion of the structural features of American Jews which create solidarity see Calvin Goldscheider, Jewish Continuity and Change. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.

<sup>iv</sup> See Deborah Dash Moore, To the Golden Cities Free Press. 1998 for a discussion of Post War American Jewish life. Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum, Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier (2nd edition), University of Chicago Press, 1979, examines the role of the synagogue in this regard.

<sup>v</sup> My book, Prayer and Community: the Havurah in American Judaism (Wayne State University Press, 1989) reviews the literature which critiqued the Conservative and Reform synagogues of the 1960s.

<sup>vi</sup> Chava Weissler, Making Judaism Meaningful, also analyzes the havurah critique of Jewish life. Michael E. Staub's Torn at the Roots: the Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Post War America (Columbia University Press, 2002) examines the political commitments of this generation.