

How Is Leadership Changing?

Dilemmas that Jewish Leaders Must Face

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Introduction

Whether you are creating a new organization or reconfiguring an old one; whether your organization is small or large; whether you sit at the top of the organizational pyramid or are a newcomer still finding your voice; whether you are on a search committee, engaging in self-evaluation, or thinking about recruitment—whatever your role, you are exercising leadership in the context of rapid and significant change.

Change is a fact of life, and recent years have seen change at an extraordinary rate. The post-cold war world offers unprecedented global cooperation and new kinds of threats. The emergence of the Internet has sped up the pace and the possibility for communication in ways that few could ever have anticipated. Individuals are offered a remarkable array of choices and the freedom to act on them, from consumer goods to cosmetic alterations, from the increasing tendency to embark on several careers in a lifetime to the combining of what previously seemed to be incompatible identities.

Anyone concerned about leadership must be on the lookout for what these changes mean and must be oriented toward understanding the larger context in which they are exercising leadership. Social, economic and political changes are affecting the shape of communal life, forms of personal identity and approaches to religion, spirituality and ethnicity. These societal changes mean we must alter the very way we think about leadership in general, and leadership in Jewish life in particular.

From January to June 1999, the Jewish Public Forum at CLAL convened seminars and consultations with 40 leading academics and practitioners from fields as diverse as finance, cosmology, community organizing and international relations and 23 Jewish communal leaders. We asked about their experiences and understanding of how change is affecting leadership in their disciplines. These conversations considered the following questions:

- What are the most important societal changes affecting the exercise of leadership?

- How do leaders define challenges and approach problems for which there is little precedent?
- What kinds of capacities and awarenesses are necessary to lead in a world of change?

Participants agreed that traditional traits of leadership remain important, including passion, moral integrity, knowing where you want to go, being a cheerleader and jumping into the fray. And yet, more than anything else, they agreed that leadership is increasingly dependent on the sometimes messy art of engaging a diversity of voices from a broad range of fields and translating among them. Leadership is about accepting, reading and shaping change.

This is not a how-to paper. What follows translates the insights of Jewish Public Forum participants into dilemmas and challenges for Jewish leaders working to build the Jewish communities of the present and future. It should be understood as an effort to provoke reflection and reconsideration. We imagine readers using this text as a basis for their own conversations with a diverse array of experts and practitioners.

Barbara Kellerman:

It pays to be cautious about the extent of change. "The trick is to sort out that which has been authentically altered from that which is endemic to the human condition."

1999 Seminars and Consultations on Leadership in a Time of Great Change

- January 14: Initial leadership advisory group seminar, New York
- January 15: Initial academic advisory group seminar, New York
- February 24: Consultation on leadership in Los Angeles
- March 1: Consultation on leadership in New York
- March 9: Consultation on leadership in Washington, DC
- April 26: Consultation on leadership in Boston
- June 14-15: Seminar: "Leadership and Civic Engagement in a Time of Great Change," New York

[Executive Summary](#)

[Click here for a complete list of the JPF participants.](#)

1. **The Speed of Change**

The speed of change has made *defining* problems increasingly complicated and important, even before one begins to address them. One participant gave the example of the mind-boggling advance in cloning capabilities: "Two years ago people told me that human cloning was possible. Now it's predetermined. How do you possibly have a serious conversation about the ethical and political implications of an issue like that within 18 months? You don't even get the conversation started and it's already done. So now we are going to start talking about how we are going to manage the situation."

Leadership in the face of rapid change comes to be about personal flexibility and agility and about negotiating the divide between those who are less and more able to respond to rapid change. As one participant put it: "Speed is really unsettling to people's consciousness....It's a world in which every time you lean on a wall it's already falling down....Some people love it. And they like living in that world of perpetual transition. And some people hate it and they try to escape from it. This is a major political and psychological theme of the next decade—watching how people respond to that kind of speed."

Irwin Kula:

"I see the willingness to be surprised as a crucial element of leadership."

Marvin Adelson:

"Dealing with a turbulent environment requires quick action, but we are simply not smart enough to know how to anticipate the future."

2. **Swamp Problems**

In a time of change, problems become less and less possible to address through the traditional repertoire, through organizational tinkering or by using existing intellectual frameworks. They require fundamental re-conceptualization as recourse to precedent becomes increasingly untenable. One participant pointed out that sometimes the words to articulate new problems and solutions do not even exist and using old words constrains imagination.

This is evident in everything from intervening to allay egregious human rights abuses, to maintaining a healthy democracy, to building vital Jewish communities at a time of greater integration than ever before into

American society. Ron Heifetz, in his book *Leadership without Easy Answers*, calls these types of problems "adaptive challenges." Others have used the evocative term "swamp problems."

Jewish leaders face a swamp problem that actually comes from a combination of a changing world and the success of the community: What is *Jewish* in a world where Jews are more powerful and affluent than ever before? What will the new narratives be, now that the ones that have motivated Jews throughout the late 20th century have become less compelling to new generations? How do organizations set up to deal with the crises of rescue, the threat of anti-Semitism and Israel's safety respond to a different set of challenges? What *is* the new challenge?

Jonathan Sarna:

"Zionism, saving world Jewry and overcoming anti-Semitism – those were the great themes in American Jewry. Not one of them is relevant today. Jews are a community in search of a new mission."

Brad Hirschfield on Innovation and Continuity

In order to move into the future, those who exercise leadership must understand that life might look increasingly different from the past, but there can be, along with this, deep continuity with long-standing traditions. What came to be known as rabbinic Judaism was a series of innovations that read the changes in the post-Temple environment and repackaged and reimagined Jewish life and institutions in response. Judaism has lasted as much from its ability to change as from its adherence to the past.

3. Leadership as Collaboration and Translation

In a world of rapid change and intractable challenges, leadership comes to be about soliciting the input of a multiplicity of voices and groups from different disciplines and with different skills. Defining problems in new ways and engaging new constituencies in addressing these problems means, in the words of one participant, "redefining the universe of whom to lead."

The most dramatic demonstration of the expansion in the number of relevant actors came from a participant who spoke about making economic policy in a world where "the sheer force of global financial flows" has toppled governments in East Asia. During the Third World debt crisis of the 1980s, it was possible to get the heads of 12 key banks into a room to deal with the crisis. Today, he said, global economic crisis involves "enough actors to fill a stadium."

While it has always been nice for different constituencies and groups to talk to one another, said another participant, now it is impossible to get by without collaboration among these groups. This need for collaboration comes at a time of increased specialization, thus making the challenge even greater. Leadership is increasingly about translation and building relationships.

According to several participants, leaders need to see the relevance of new forms of expertise and then help the array of groups engaged in addressing a particular problem frame their own work in broader terms. This means using language and metaphors which can be understood by a wider array of audiences.

Tsvi Blanchard on CLAL and the "Third Language"

The CLAL method is one of translation, drawing upon the ideas of Walter Benjamin. By creating contexts or environments in which people express themselves and listen to one another, new commitments and understandings emerge and new possibilities are released. Participants come to the conversation with the vocabulary and assumptions from their lives in contemporary American society. CLAL introduces inherited Jewish texts and traditions, employing a second language, that of core Jewish values. As the conversation continues, what Benjamin calls a "third language" emerges, which connects the experiences of American Jews to their inherited traditions and texts, enabling participants to see their work, family and leisure through a new Jewish lens, and transforming the Jewish tradition through the encounter.

Leaders need to create settings in which individuals and groups who had not previously collaborated come together, in an effort to redefine conventional approaches to difficult problems. They then need to function as translators between disparate cultures and specialist languages. One participant gave the example of a new series of dialogues between the business community, who are long-standing adversaries of the human rights community, and human rights advocates. They began to work together in the hope of developing new approaches to labor conditions in the Third World and new mechanisms for pressuring governments in countries where business is good but human rights practices remain below international standards.

Collaboration also means expanding the domains in which specialized groups feel responsible for common problem solving. One participant

described her work on issues of children in the inner city. The project involved creating unprecedented collaborations between people involved in crime fighting and people involved in childhood education. She warned, however, that leaders face a dilemma when building new collaborations. They must "expand the bubble of responsibility, without letting it break." While specialized groups need to see their work as having larger implications, the quality of their particular contributions will diminish if new responsibilities become too burdensome.

David Elcott:

"Many of the most interesting and talented Jews in America have not been asked to participate in the conversations about the Jewish future. That has been a great loss and a limitation on imagining new possibilities."

The Jewish Public Forum, an Example of Redefinition, Translation and Relationship Building

An anthropologist who works on the Korean-American community, a political scientist working on postcommunist democratization or an astrophysicist mapping the universe might not seem obvious candidates for contributing to a conversation about the Jewish future in America. Yet during the first year of the Jewish Public Forum, CLAL demonstrated the importance of involving such unlikely candidates.

- The anthropologist, who studies Korean-Americans, was immediately struck by the similarities between Jews and Koreans in their self-understanding as diaspora communities. She dramatized the importance of comparison when thinking about changing Jewish identity.
- The political scientist saw interesting parallels between the demands facing leaders in the new world of postcommunism and the challenges facing Jewish leaders in a world of great technological change in which old narratives no longer work.
- The astrophysicist brought an ethic of optimism in the face of what seem to be insurmountable problems. Without this ethic, scientific innovation would be impossible. The success of his project, noted as the most important scientific breakthrough of 1998, has proven this.

The process of translation was important from the outset, when identifying and recruiting individuals who were not part of the networks affiliated with the organized Jewish community. Some wondered initially what they could contribute to a "Jewish" conversation when they knew little about the Jewish community. Most became eager to join the conversation once they felt that their ideas and experiences could be translated and utilized across disciplines and fields of expertise. Moreover, they began to enjoy being part of a challenge that had not previously engaged them.

The success of the project and its promise for the future required learning to conduct open yet structured conversations, which allowed individuals who speak different professional languages to talk to one another. Unlike academic conferences based on presentations, but also unlike informal chats, such conversations engage people in a joint task, such as a case study, pushing them to think about their expertise in new ways. CLAL facilitators functioned as translators and negotiated the building of relationships among the participants themselves and between participants and CLAL. Several participants have gone on to collaborate with CLAL or with one another on separate projects.

4. Leadership as Relationship Building

Collaboration and translation is not just getting unlike people into the same room with an "interpreter." Leadership means building and negotiating the relationships among the many groups involved in complicated projects.

In addition, these relationships have to be among the different parties themselves, not just filtered through a central person or organization. This is really the "old fashioned human capacity to connect," a participant said. But it has become increasingly important. She recounted a story about a deal she had put together for building a new sports arena in downtown Los Angeles. Many different parties were involved: contractors, lawyers and city officials. After months of negotiations, she received a call telling her that the deal was dead. She realized that the principals had never talked to one another; they had only dealt with one another through the city as coordinating agency.

The demands on leaders to build relationships across different disciplinary boundaries and among groups that are sometimes located across the globe were emphasized by a participant who heads a major international

scientific collaboration. The complexity of the challenge at hand makes these relationships necessary, while information technology makes them possible in ways that were unimaginable even a few years ago. And yet, the lack of face to face contact does not allow people to come to trust one another sufficiently to take risks together. Leaders must pay more attention than ever to building the kind of trust that makes innovation possible.

5. **Who's In and Who's Out?**

Crossing boundaries among groups that have not worked together before can upset expected hierarchies of authority and status, shaking up understandings of who is on the "inside" and who on the "outside."

One participant talked about taking her academic publishing house, one that had been completely based on the printed word, into the digital age. The technology people, whose expertise was needed to make the transition work, were all under 30 years of age; the press' managers were all quite a bit older.

The generational divide between those who were going to build the program and those who would be managing the process became the real leadership challenge.

Experience and expertise, insider and outsider status, become increasingly fluid in a period of change. Rapid change can make flexibility more important than experience. Leaders whose authority comes from expertise might be called upon to step out of their areas of specialization. One participant suggested that both leaders and "followers" will increasingly have to contend with feelings that they lack authenticity as they are called upon to do things for which they have not been trained.

Change in Jewish life might very well need to come from outside established institutions. It will need to be based on new sorts of resources and research. Demographers, for example, may need to compare the Jewish experience with that of other ethnic and religious communities, or examine the effects of broader societal trends such as globalization on Jewish identity and community. However, empowering new people and searching for new types of expertise can threaten those who feel they have paid their dues in terms of education, financial commitment, professional service or voluntary activity. Tensions will arise between those who prefer to see the Jewish community's issues as unique and those who would like to look at them in comparative perspective.

6. **Who's Up and Who's Down?**

Corporations have learned that a strict hierarchy is increasingly more of an obstacle than an asset for accomplishing difficult tasks in a changing world. Often the input from people with less status, in terms of job description, age, gender, experience, or years of service, can be critical for the efficient functioning and the growth of organizations.

One participant gave the example of the revamping of Ford Motors. The auto maker's efficiency increased dramatically after management elicited ideas from workers on the production line.

But if leaders are to go to where employees, constituents or congregants are, and are to empower new voices as a way to unleash potential for change, leaders themselves must be willing to step out of the spotlight. Participants pointed out that leadership has to be about "setting the stage for others," thus relinquishing the desire to receive credit.

According to this model, it will be difficult to infuse new energy into Jewish life without listening to the grass roots and tapping new energies and forms of Jewishness. However, leaders could feel threatened by new centers of energy and newer, less traditional Jewish expressions.

How much should leaders be guided by the needs and desires of constituencies and how much by their own principles? This obviously varies from elected officials to business executives to rabbis. "Obviously you can't bend to the wind," said one participant. "But the beauty of polls is that they are a constant check."

7. **The Pain of Change**

While democratization is a powerful stimulus for change in hierarchical organizations, it can be an obstacle to difficult and frightening change. It is not just leaders who are challenged to step aside in ways that might be uncomfortable. Flattened hierarchies and flexible teams that elicit involvement and responsibility at all levels are by definition threatening to individuals who were previously in positions of authority or to individuals whose understanding of the world rested on assumptions that are now being disrupted.

In periods of rapid change, such anxieties become increasingly acute. One participant talked about the impact of change on those who fear it as a "stress-test with the treadmill going uphill." Often the divide between the anxious and the adaptable coincides with generations. This is happening everywhere, from finance to the military to universities. It is a major issue for leaders enacting change, as well as for those who are helping individuals adjust to change.

Leaders must have empathy with those who will be hurt by change and figure out how to get people to accept the pain of transition for the sake of longer-term benefits. They need to articulate narratives to help people make sense of upheaval and of what will happen along the path of change. Leaders must make people appreciate the new when it feels as if the old and familiar is being destroyed. And they must also, according to Ron Heifetz, define "what is precious and what is expendable."

8. **The New World of Information Technology**

New technologies have made it increasingly possible to circumvent hierarchical arrangements and traditional authority roles. The Internet and other types of technologies allow broader access to information that in the past was privileged. If authority comes from knowing more or better than one's followers, then greater access to information undermines this authority. It is easy to imagine the dilemmas this poses for rabbis and denominations, whose authority can increasingly be questioned or avoided altogether. Rather than relying on materials prepared by a centralized, authoritative institution, communities can produce their own prayer books and rituals.

Information technology gives consumers direct access to products, circumventing middlemen; one such example is Internet stock trading. In the Jewish world, this means that commonly motivated people can join together for particular activities without attending a multifaceted and centralized institution like the synagogue.

If authority is less clear in a world of individuals empowered to be their own authorities, leadership does not become irrelevant, but it might increasingly come to play a different role. Another aspect of the world of information technology is the enormous range of information and messages that flow through various media. One participant suggested that leadership becomes an act of helping people make decisions and judgments amidst a plethora of overwhelming and sometimes unreliable information. Another said that leaders "will charge us with the obligation to

sort through the information we receive and make real choices for ourselves."

9. Different Generations, Different Kinds of Leaders

Personal autonomy and choice, coupled with a suspicion of traditional authorities, are an increasingly pervasive value, particularly in the Baby Boomer and Generation X age cohorts. Might leaders from these generations be increasingly wary of using their authority? Might members of these generations, committed as they are to choice, be difficult to mobilize toward common ends?

At a time of change, the gulf between generations becomes more pronounced. Younger generations are thought to differ significantly from their parents of the World War II generation – not only in a suspicion of hierarchy, but in their expectations about and habits of philanthropy and participation in communal life. Political scientist Robert Putnam, in a recent article, called the World War II generation the "long civic generation" in contrast to younger generations which increasingly tend to be less engaged in civic associations.

In Jewish life, the youngest generations find the narratives that animated their parents increasingly distant. The generation coming of age knowing only the fast-paced world of the Internet is thought to have a comfort with speed and ambiguity that their parents cannot share. According to one participant: "When I asked my students what the term 'generation gap' meant to them, the first thing that came to mind was technology." These younger individuals are growing up with "new images of how to make money, of the basis of opportunity and wealth," and with different expectations about "how you organize things, how you do things and what really counts."

All of these trends pose increasing challenges for leadership negotiating across the generations.

10. Decentralization versus Cohesion

The dramatic changes described above almost all point to a common dilemma: decentralization. There is a decentralization of authority, power, information, expertise, and goal-setting. Clearly the role of leaders is dramatically changed by

this seeming lack of cohesion. Leaders need to ask: What is lost in the process of decentralization? How can leaders maintain cohesion? How can they determine how much cohesion is necessary?

In the Jewish world, the devolution of power to local federations and the trend toward designated giving, without the mediation of central fundraising and allocation bodies, have raised concerns about maintaining a common sense of responsibility to a Jewish people.

The question of where cohesion will come from and what it will look like remains a type of swamp problem that faces more than the Jewish community. The challenge of maintaining cohesion is an issue for America as a society and in a globalizing world where nation-states may be in decline and where new, even unknown forms of loyalty will emerge.

It is imperative to recognize that the trends towards decentralization are powerful enough that they will alter the types and intensity of attachments individuals have to other people, institutions, nations and ethnic groups.