



The Personnel Crisis in Jewish Life: A contrarian perspective and new approaches

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Introduction

Several years ago, shortly after moving to New York, I was invited to serve on the young leadership boards of 2 different national Jewish organizations. I was both surprised and flattered. After all, by that time I had been active in the Jewish community for over 30 years, having held numerous significant lay and professional leadership roles. So it was surprising to be asked -to represent "new" leadership - although it was confirming to be seen as a part of the future more than the past.

More striking was the fact that, at the time, I was approaching my mid- 50's! Even in the superannuated world of Jewish communal leadership it was hard to imagine someone of my age being considered a "young leader." While I might flatter myself to think that it was my youthful demeanor, I suspect that it was less a statement about me than it was about the current state of leadership.

Why, you may ask, do I begin an article on the personnel crisis in Jewish life with an anecdote about lay leadership? The answer is that, even though much is being written on the crisis on the professional side, it is my view that the issue of paid professionals cannot be separated from the larger question of Jewish communal leadership. There are endemic and epidemic matters which inform all of Jewish life - and a resolution will not emerge from small initiatives. Moreover, most of the currently proposed strategies to solve the "personnel crisis" do not adequately address the systemic and cultural issues and thus will, at best, tweak the system. In other words, this is one of those Big Picture issues, the solutions to which will require that we change the way we do business.

Those of us who attend national and international Jewish meetings are happy to see our friends and colleagues of long standing. But is it only a perception that there seems to be a recycling of the same people into familiar roles?

This is not to say that none of these people, lay and professional, are worthy. Many are very bright, extraordinarily committed, generous with time and money, abundantly caring, Jewishly knowledgeable, and deeply devoted to Jewish life and future. Many

surely have earned and continue to deserve their leadership positions. So what's the problem?

The problem is that over time, organized Jewish life becomes a closed circle. On occasion one can join the circle but the conditions are that one shouldn't challenge too hard. So even though every organization espouses a commitment to bring in "new blood", in reality those who are invited in are rarely those who challenge the status quo way of thinking.

And, as my anecdote suggests, new does not necessarily mean young. While it is true that after the dot.com bust, there are fewer 25 year old ceo's, in the private sector there are still many ceo's, presidents, and senior executives in their 40's. But in Jewish life, while ageism most assuredly exists, on the lay side of things, 40 is barely a young leader.

Moreover, while in the private sector, it is considered healthy to reinvent the corporation on a regular basis, all too often in Jewish life, change initiatives seem to end up simply tweaking or cosmetically repackaging old models.

Our communal rhetoric calls for a much needed renaissance - a word which, if it means anything, surely means "change." Our actions, though, suggest that we seem to believe that Jewish life is not in need of change. We hear of calls bemoaning the personnel problem and the need to create major initiatives to address it. But our actions suggest that we already have the correct leadership and bench strength. So are these calls for change and new personnel simply an empty liturgy of those who, underneath it all, believe that *après nous, le deluge*? Or do the calls for change truly reflect a deep and profound morass that the current structures cannot solve - despite a genuine desire to do so?

Recently there has been much said, written, and funded to explore the professional personnel side of things. There are very welcome initiatives to redress gaps and glass ceilings for day schools, camps, Hillels, federations, JCC's, synagogues, etc. [In various capacities, I have been deeply involved in several, and I am quite persuaded that these are monies and energies well spent. Note to funders: don't stop now!]

Unquestionably, we have too few people in the Jewish communal professional world, especially given the necessary ratios to really do what is necessary to make a difference in people's lives. And to have more and higher quality people doing this work for enough of their professional lives to make a difference will require all of the well known solutions: higher status, higher salaries, better career ladders, etc. But because the challenges are truly systemic, the solutions will have to go beyond these methods.

The Challenges

In order to solve a problem, one must ask both what is necessary and what is doable.

1. Staff:volunteer ratio. Is the Jewish community in fact large enough to sustain a profoundly different staff:volunteer ratio? What can and should work for the

- community? And how much can the remainder afford to sustain them at the level necessary to do right by those career choices? If we have a shrinking community to begin with, can the remainder shoulder the burden to increase both the numbers and the salaries of those working on the community's behalf?
2. **Social Status.** Assuming that one can demonstrate that the financial wherewithal is manageable, there still remains a larger "social" question. Would you want your son/daughter to do that? When I began my professional career in the late 60's/early 70's, there seemed to be a respect and admiration for the commitment that led someone with good potential and respected credentials to choose a career in the not-for-profit realm. By the 80's, many, too many, people would look upon those choices more cynically. Why, they would ask, would one choose to make less money and spend one's life in that sector if one could choose otherwise. Even today, we continue to hear all sorts of strange and distorted assumptions about those who work in the not-for-profit world. As recently as this winter, at a seminar I conducted at MAKOR on choosing a meaningful career, many young people articulated that they were considering a career change to the not for profit world so they wouldn't have to work so hard. There is still a myth that one who works in the not-for-profit sector needn't and doesn't work as hard as someone in the for profit sector.

Another example: during a several year period, I stuck my toe in the consulting world - working with for-profit companies. Interestingly, if a potential client discovered that I am a rabbi, the outcome became predictable - if the potential client was Jewish, I NEVER got the contract; if the potential client was not Jewish, I ALWAYS did. [Fortunately, there were more non-Jewish clients.] What does that tell us about the perceived status of those who choose careers in the Jewish community?

Of course, one must be cautious about generalizing from one's own experiences. Yet these anecdotes are reflective of other articles and position papers by those who advocate an improved status for Jewish communally paid professionals. The specifics may be personal; the condition quite general.

3. **Parochialism.** Those who work within the Jewish community often find it to be claustrophobic. Most Diaspora Jews have made a conscious choice to embrace the larger world while celebrating their Jewishness. This is true across the board, from those who are in the Modern Orthodox camp to those who are more liberal to those who are secular but affirming Jews - which comprises the overwhelming majority of Diaspora Jewry. We are beyond the self denying and name changing of a previous era. Yet if one chooses to work for and within the community, one's associations are exclusively Jewish. It is perceived by many as needless self ghettoization. Even if one solves the financial and status issues mentioned above, the question of where one fits in the larger world remains. [Of course, for some, working in and for the Jewish community solves a problem of the potential conflict of observance and job demands. But one hopes that the desire to work in

the Jewish world not become limited to those who are the most religiously observant.]

4. Valuing the outsider. There remains a Catch 22 for many who climb the ladder in Jewish life. Ironically, at the middle and senior executive level, there are many organizations which rate work outside the Jewish world higher than experience within. How many search committees have we heard express their preference to reach beyond the known cast of characters to go outside? This not-subtle message is heard enough that it signals to many that it would be better to enter the executive ranks from a successful career in a non Jewish sector than to work one's way up the ladder internally. Why choose a leadership path in Jewish communal life if it is not valued at the end?
5. Super-Jews. One final hurdle remains for those who are active in Jewish communal life, on both the lay and professional side. For many, those who choose active involvement are considered "super-Jews." And the majority of Diaspora Jews does not wish to be "super-Jews" or even assume that they share the same values with those whom they believe are. Thus, beyond all of the other barriers discussed here, it is perceived by many that the Jewish organizational world is simply impenetrable and functions with different values. Why choose a paid career or volunteer leadership position with people whom you perceive to be different than you and your social group?

Before proposing solutions, there are two other, more generic issues which must be understood as well.

6. The Womanization of the Not for Profit World. While there is no question that a persistent glass ceiling continues to exist in many sectors, it is important to recognize that certain professions have become "women's" careers. "Womenization", whereby certain careers have a very high percentage of women, is not to be confused with the "feminization" of work. In the former, employers, consciously or not, view their workers as "2nd income" or short term and thus pay less and have less long term financial commitment. In effect, many careers are thereby viewed, sadly, as less prestigious. In the case of the feminist model, which exists rarely, careers would have a different balance of work and career, would not be gender biased, and would reflect different dynamics and values in the work place.

We most assuredly see this phenomenon in Jewish life. Women are predominant everywhere but in the executive suite. And even there, it is changing. The double edged question, which goes much beyond the Jewish community, is what will happen to the Jewish community if it is staffed primarily by women? I am not the first to ask this question; there is much debate about it. But it is impossible to ignore if we are to plan for and implement radical changes in the communal leadership structure.

7. Commitment to an employer and by an employer. Once upon a time, an IBM employee was an employee for life. Similarly, a responsible employee in the not-

for-profit realm could reasonably assume the likelihood of lifetime employment. No longer. If there is no semblance of loyalty to an employee, there surely is no incentive for people to feel loyalty to an employer. If transitions and consecutive careers are the expected norm, it is unrealistic to assume that the Jewish community can invent a system which runs counter. Both agencies and employees have now been acculturated to other ways of thinking.

I have written elsewhere on the perversity of a society which devalues employee loyalty but expects 24/7 commitment. [in Jewish parlance, 24/6]. There surely is little justification for a society organized around such a principle even in the for-profit sector, but many workers choose to do it because of the financial incentives. The not-for-profit world has no such incentives, so the same "24/7" weighs more heavily on the shoulders and psyches of those employees who feel those expectations.

So we come full circle: the barriers to entry to lay or professional involvement and continuity are very high. And they are sufficiently stubborn that they don't lend themselves to facile solutions.

Some Solutions

There are, however, some ideas which might help address these dilemmas. Most important, none of the ideas which follow will work in a vacuum; and the problem will not go away without a major cultural and economic commitment. The many wonderful initiatives for camping, day schools, federations, the rabbinate, and Hillels must ultimately be considered simply starting points to something much more transformative. What follows are some proposals which apply across the board and would begin to make a cultural difference if applied on a large scale.

Encourage Jewish employment as a part of a lifetime of work and not as an entire career. Develop career training and job options which enable movement in and out at various times during one's work life so that one does not feel that one must choose. This is particularly important beyond the entry level where recruitment is not such a problem; retention into the mid-career is where the challenge lies.

Develop partnerships with the private sector. Recent developments in the business world demonstrate that there may be less of a differential than in the past:

1. corporate employees are being asked to affirm societal values as well as bottom line goals;
2. staff reductions mean that private sector employees now must multi-task in much the same way that not-for-profit employees do;
3. fiscal accountability is not an issue restricted to either sector;
4. job security and fringe benefits are iffy, not guaranteed in either sector;
5. not for profit employees are acculturated to being "mission driven" - an increasingly desirable attribute for the private sector;

6. for profit employees are acculturated to be "outcome driven," a desirable trait in the not for profit realm.

Such partnerships and cross training might be cutting edge and create an entirely new culture in the workplace.

Professionals should be encouraged to assume volunteer roles in other organizations than the one for which they work. Nothing helps a not-for-profit professional appreciate and cultivate volunteer leadership more than being one. After all, if one's livelihood is dependent on the voluntary sector, one should demonstrate a commitment to it. And it allows other volunteer board members to grow to appreciate the knowledge and wisdom of those who are working professionally.

Create part time paid positions in the Jewish community for those who work in the for profit sector. Nothing helps volunteers learn about what really happens more than sitting in the professional's chair with responsibility and accountability for their performance. This would also help address the inevitable and endemic shortage of professionals in many areas while allowing full time professionals to develop skills in which they excel.

Establish realistic expectations for both lay and professional leaders. The for-profit realm has learned that excellence requires focus; in the Jewish world we often expect everyone to be able to do everything. The Jewish world should expect excellence in everything we do, but not assume that anyone can do everything well. Jobs and agencies should build on their strengths, not attempt to be all purpose. All too often the opposite is true - that pro's and lay leaders are expected to learn how to do everything, inevitably building on weakness.

Establish a different salary system. The issue is not simply the salary differential between the private sector and communal work. It is also a question of when the financial crunch is most felt. It is in the middle of one's career when the financial pressures are greatest - but the not for profit world typically pays incrementally. Thus, at the end of a career, the long term employee may be making a respectable income, but along the way there are real discrepancies with the private sector. There should be significant salary bumps at the times when their financial pressures are the greatest.

Create a fringe benefit system which transcends fields of service. A community wide health care program and pension program would allow lateral movement and guarantee that one is not penalized for choosing a gratifying career path. [One must assume that there would be substantial financial savings if such national benefit plans existed, but I leave that to others to determine.]

Jewish literacy. We have made great strides in expanding the Jewish literacy of adults. Wexner, Me'ah, and Melton are just 3 of the best known of the programs committed to creating an educated laity. Ironically, there are fewer such programs for Jewish professionals who may not have come with strong Jewish backgrounds. This is surely an area which transcends lay and professional roles and may provide a creative meeting

point. And it will be a very practical way to truly bring about the much heralded renaissance.

10 Year Statute of Limitations. Much of the literature on executive leadership suggests that there is a 5-10 year window of maximum effectiveness. Perhaps there needs to be a community wide standard that after 10 years, one must move on. On the lay level, this would help [although not guarantee] that new blood would assume leadership roles.

On the professional level, this also would work toward the continued reinvention of the organization but has a different set of problems. I don't dismiss the disruption this can cause on professionals and organizations. But if one takes seriously that the community should help people retool and rewards these kinds of changes, the professionals and the organizations for which they work can look forward to a lifetime of new and creative challenges. Burn out will be less and reenergized and creative work should continue for a longer part of one's career.

I am sure these proposals are but a fraction of those which may make a difference. But unless we develop a major cultural change in lay and professional involvement in Jewish life, all of our genuine but modest initiatives will barely impact the vitality of Jewish life. Our capacity for these radical changes is as great [or as limited] as our commitment.

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