

## INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

Barry Shrage leads this issue with his reflective analysis of the change process in Boston. Shrage argues for a robust working relationship, indeed a partnership, between synagogues and federations in order to create a viable context for powerful congregational and communal education. Mining the case of Boston for guiding principles and generalizable learnings, Shrage identifies the key factors and components of system-wide change and puts forth a cogent and compelling vision of the sacred communities of the future. This important article will stimulate the thinking of communal leaders focused on the broader perspective on community-wide change.

## Sacred Communities at the Heart of Jewish Life: 20 Years of Federation/Synagogue Collaboration and Change in Boston

*Dedicated to the memory of two holy souls: Dr. Lewis Millender and Alan J. Tichnor who first bridged the gap between federation and congregations in Boston.*

BARRY SHRAGE

**J**acob left Beer-sheba, and set out for Haran. He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. He had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it. And the Lord was standing beside him and He said, “I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac: the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring. Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants. Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know it!” Shaken, he said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and the gateway to heaven.”

*Genesis 28: 10-17*

### A VISION OF JEWISH COMMUNITY AND MEANING

**Where is the house of God? Where is the gateway to heaven? What is the blessing and what has become of the promise?**

**We are all Jacob. All of us are on a journey. All are seeking a stairway, a path to community and meaning, to true spirituality and to purposeful lives.**

**The Jewish institutions that help to find answers to these questions will define Jewish life in the 21st century. Those that don't simply won't survive.**

The synagogue is the most critical institution in Jewish life. Its success depends on its ability to transform Jewish life and to move Judaism from the periphery of our lives to the core of our existence. For this to happen, the focus of synagogue life must move from empty prayer to meaningful learning, from sadness to joy, from *Yom Kippur* to *Simchat Torah*, from “membership” to real community, and from passive affiliation to a passion for social justice and meaning.

During 30 years of work for the Jewish community and fifteen as President of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston, I've come to believe that the future of the Jewish community in America lies

in the development of a common vision; one filled with meaning and beauty and a unifying strategy that links federations and synagogues in order to transform the spiritual life of our people and create real communities of *Torah, Tzedek* and *Chesed* – learning, social justice and caring. To do this, federations must transform themselves from fundraising institutions focused primarily on overseas needs to dynamic networks rooted in real face-to-face communities, linking donors and ideas, including new constituencies, particularly synagogues, and driven by a compelling vision of our Jewish future. Similarly, congregations are transforming themselves from “houses of worship” that provide barely adequate Jewish education for children into real face-to-face communities whose primary goal is the intellectual and spiritual transformation of each family that passes through the congregational “gateway.” This new mission requires a larger and better-trained staff, energized volunteers, far more financial resources, and new partnerships between agencies, congregations and congregational movements, including far greater federation support.

But first we must acknowledge that we have both serious challenges and unlimited opportunities. The good news is that most Jews do pass through the congregational gateway. The bad news is that most emerge spiritually untouched. The good news is that most American Jews still send their children to congregational schools. The bad news is that despite the best efforts of talented educators, far too many still dislike the experience and most – especially those whose education ends at age 13 – emerge having learned far too little to affect their lives or their identity.

The bad news is that classroom education for children cannot work if parents and the larger culture they represent have little respect or love for our texts and our literature. Worse, most of our congregants come to our synagogues without any substantial knowledge of our rich 3500-year-old civilization, having never experienced the joy of Jewish learning – and worse yet, most leave our synagogues pretty much the same way.

The good news is that we can change it all. We can make things much better. It is a lie to say that we just don’t have the answers. We have many answers. Intensive Jewish summer camping works and youth groups work, and movement trips to Israel work and family education works

and serious adult learning works and classroom learning can work if it is part of a total integrated congregational education system – a true community of learners.

All that is required is the vision to recognize the need for radical change and the money, resources and persistence to implement change and to follow our dream.

Over the last 30 years, we’ve seen a number of important trends emerge and find great champions in Jewish life – day schools, or social justice, or camping, or free travel to Israel have all been offered as the answers to our existential Jewish challenge. But day schools alone are not the answer and camps alone are not the answer and Birthright alone is not the answer. These are all excellent and effective programs, but they are not Judaism. Judaism is a life based in community and filled with reverence and beauty and spirituality and justice and meaning and a connection to Israel and to an eternal people. This vision of a sacred community must be at the heart of congregational life. Adult learning and social justice programs and Jewish camps and trips to Israel and family education will all need to become a standard part of each family’s spiritual journey through our Jewish community if congregations are to achieve their potential. But these programs can only truly succeed if they are rooted in a broader vision that includes and transcends them all.

## **AFTER SEPTEMBER 11: THE SEARCH FOR COMMUNITY AND MEANING**

The aftermath of September 11 reinforced what we already knew. A synagogue is much more than a platform for education. It can be the stuff of community itself – the basic building block of Jewish life. During the weeks following September 11, Americans turned to their synagogues and churches in greater numbers than ever before. They came looking for renaissance and meaning. They came to find answers to pressing questions. They came because they wanted to be able to tell their children that life could still have meaning and purpose after the disaster. They came to find solace and hope because many were concerned that they could no longer assure their children a better life after the economic collapse of the summer and fall of 2001 and the sense of insecurity that pervaded our world after the destruction of the World Trade Center. Many found what they were looking for, but far too many found only crowds and words, without caring

and without meaning and without spirituality, revealing both the weakness and the potential of congregational life in America.

Early in December, the Biennial Convention of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations was held in Boston. It was the greatest biennial that was ever held by the UAHC and one of the very greatest Jewish meetings in recent history. It was filled with joy, emotion, caring and faith and it took place just three months after the catastrophe of September 11. It was a marker that our Jewish renaissance is happening and that it has already begun to fill our Jewish world with confidence, emotion and purpose. It was one of many signs that revealed a brighter future for the American Jewish community and for world Jewry. And it placed the congregation at the heart of that transformation.

## CONGREGATION AND COMMUNITY

### Face-to-Face Community: The Context of Successful Jewish Education

For Jewish life to flourish, for Jewish education to succeed, we must create a unified vision of Jewish life and Jewish schooling must be part of a larger context of Jewish existence, including community and family, caring and commitment, justice and purpose. Cut off from a living Jewish community, Jewish education for children becomes meaningless talk with little connection to values, culture or purpose. To be clear: congregational, after school education will fail for most children if it is not part of a transformed, vital congregational experience.

The idea of community is thus at the heart of the Jewish enterprise and the continuing need for community is one of the clearest messages to emerge from the terrible trauma of September 11th. A clear definition of community must therefore be the starting point for a renaissance of Jewish life for both federations and congregations. According to Robert Bellah in *Habits of the Heart*:

“...a community is a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it. Such a community is not quickly formed. It almost always has a history and so it is also a community of memory.”

“...While the idea of community, if limited to neighbors and friends, is an inadequate basis for meeting our current needs, we want to affirm community as a cultural theme that calls us to wider and wider circles of loyalty, ultimately embracing that universal community of all beings...”

Professor Arnold Eisen translates this idea of community into Jewish terms in his 1995 essay, “Reimagining Jewish Community in America” and suggests three starting points or primary building blocks for the definition and construction of Jewish community:

- It must be local, face-to-face, as near as the *re'ea* or neighbor whom Leviticus XIX commands us to treat in a manner befitting love.
- It must also be *le'olam*: unbounded by time or space, grounded in the unique Jewish situation that is writ large in the world today as much as ever, and dedicated to a *tikkun* that is commensurably all-embracing.
- Finally, on each of those levels, the “words” we speak as Jews must conform to the grammar of Jewish life, underlying and flowing from the conversation begun at Sinai. That is to say, it must be founded on the *Torah* based on narrative or resulting in just action. It must include both study and deed – study as deed, deed as study; both of them arising out of community, constituting community and reinforcing community. We will be a community defined by our conversation and our activities.

### Core Values and a Common Agenda

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

As diverse as our community is, a set of core beliefs and an action agenda is emerging, around which the vast majority of Jews can agree. There is a growing consensus on the importance of developing a renaissance of Jewish community around the basic values and principles of

*Torah* – serious Jewish learning; *Chesed* – kindness, and caring for Jews here, in Israel and throughout the Diaspora, and *Tzedek – Tikkun Olam* – social justice and the possibility of a rebuilt world for our Jewish people and for all humankind.

### **The Community Matrix**

The Jewish conceptions of learning, caring and justice can only be fully realized in the context of strong, interdependent “face-to-face” communities. Learning, justice and caring are the point of Jewish life. They are the seeds of Jewish community. At the same time, Jewish communities are the ground within which these seeds must grow. Too often in the past, strategies for Jewish education or continuity have ignored the need for community, while strategies for community-building have failed to understand that communities require culture, meaning and purpose to flourish. The need for a strategy that supports both must be at the core of the work of our new federation-synagogue relationship.

Federations have a central role to play in community building, but cannot reach out to every member of the Jewish community and cannot become a “face-to-face” community for any but a minority of committed volunteers. For the rest, the task of binding Jews to each other with caring, concern and love, and to systems of Jewish belief, Jewish learning, Jewish values and Jewish social action, belongs to “gateway” institutions, primarily congregations and Jewish Community Centers. The role of federation must therefore be to strengthen and support congregations; to link them to the resources and staffing they require; to encourage, develop, and fund powerful programs that can truly transform them into communities of *Torah*, *Tzedek* and *Chesed*.

### **Jewish Community in a Mobile World**

But how can we maintain “real” Jewish communities in the face of the breathtaking mobility of the 21st century? Paradoxically, I believe that this challenge actually represents our greatest opportunity. How many of us have experienced the beauty and the sense of relief we feel when we find Jewish life in a foreign country we’re visiting? Suddenly we are “at home.” In a time of mobility, community becomes that much more important, that much more desperately sought after by human beings who are, after all, biologically designed for communal existence. And so the existence of strong, caring synagogues that will wel-

come and care about us wherever we move becomes that much more important and that much more attractive for Jewish life in the 21st century.

### **THE BOSTON MODEL**

Over the last 15 years CJP, the Boston Jewish Federation, and our congregational community have conducted a continuing experiment in congregational change and federation-synagogue relations. From the Supplementary Jewish Education Task Force to the Synagogue Program Fund to the Commission on Jewish Continuity to JRNI, the Jewish Resource Network Initiative, Boston has been the acknowledged leader in creating partnerships between federation agencies (especially the Hebrew College and the Bureau of Jewish Education) and congregations, funding innovation, and finally institutionalizing innovation through community wide programmatic change. Throughout a decade and a half of effort we have learned that change is difficult but it is possible. Moreover, change can be made to pervade an entire community rather than just a single institution, creating a critical mass of change that generates its own momentum and that is far more difficult to reverse.

Boston’s success is based on a very different model of communal change and federation-synagogue relations than most communities have created. It is rooted in a new vision of congregational life and of the congregation as part of a broader communal network. We started with a new conception, based in part on work done at the Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland in the mid-eighties, and we learned from our “work in progress” every step of the way. We were committed to learning; we were working with an incredible group of talented professionals and committed volunteers at CJP and at our congregations; we had the full support of our congregational movements; and most importantly, and I think differently from most communities, we were in it for the long haul.

This was not going to be a short-lived experiment in federation-synagogue relations. We were not funding short term “innovative projects” or trying to make our congregations love us. We didn’t even try to raise more money for the federation from congregants. We were highly motivated by the urgent need for successful new models in Jewish education and we were optimistic about the potential of our community, our congregations, and the continuity of

our Jewish future. Our work was at the very heart of our conception of community. Our presence, our commitment and our funding were not going away. We were blessed with great continuity of staff and volunteer leadership over fifteen years and we built our shared vision into a Strategic Plan that kept us “on task” even as we changed tactics and added to our agenda over time. In reviewing our work – our successes and challenges – nine important principles emerge. Some we understood at the beginning, some developed over time, and most continue to differentiate our approach from other communities:

## **THE PROCESS OF CHANGE**

### **Creation of a True Partnership with Congregations and Congregational Movements**

The work of educational change in Boston began in 1988 with a relatively new planning concept modeled on work that developed in Cleveland in the mid-1980s. At the core of the new concept was the realization that 70% to 80% of Boston’s children were educated in a congregational context; that most families gave their primary Jewish loyalty to their congregations and rabbis; and that congregations controlled vast educational resources, including camps, youth work and Israel experiences that were only waiting to be unlocked and coordinated.

Any serious effort to engage the Boston Federation in the work of educational change and Jewish continuity would therefore require a serious working collaboration with congregations. The Commission on Jewish Continuity was therefore constituted as an equal partnership between the federation and its agencies and Boston’s congregations, congregational movements, and the Synagogue Council. After an initial period of trust building, the Commission partnership yielded real collaboration and a common vision of change. At the heart of our common vision and the trust that made it all possible was the principle of mutuality. CJP did not come to “save the synagogues from themselves” and the congregational leadership did not come to criticize the federation. We came together to create a revolution in Jewish life that would change us all and lead to a Jewish renaissance that would assure a wonderful Jewish community for all our children and grandchildren.

Beyond its unique collaboration between the federation and the synagogues, the Commission led to an extraordi-

nary level of cooperation among the movements: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist working together for the common good.

### **A Conscious Movement from Experimentation to Institutionalized Change**

From the start we were clear about the need to create a new integrated model of formal and informal education along with an emphasis on education for children, families and adults. We believed that the time of experimentation and program development had ended and that the time had come to institutionalize models that we already knew had a high probability of success. Israel travel did not require further testing. Funding and incentives were required to make Israel travel a standard part of every youngster’s Jewish education. Family education did not require new innovative models. It required full time staffing in every congregation to make it part of each family’s synagogue experience. High impact youth work had been proven as essential for a quality teen educational environment since at least the mid-70’s. What was required was a federation and synagogue commitment to hire full time youth workers along with federation funding to incentivize congregations and make adequate staffing a norm rather than an exception. We decided not to fund feel good short-term programs but rather to invest in long-term institution-wide change.

### **Investment of Top Synagogue and Federation Leadership**

The highest level of federation and synagogue leadership were personally involved in the process, including the Executive Director (President) of CJP and the Vice President for Planning, along with the Director of the Commission and the directors of the regional congregational movements. They all worked at Commission meetings and behind the scenes to address difficult issues and challenges as they arose, and to achieve the consensus that ultimately prevailed. The Commission process also had the input and involvement of the rabbinical and volunteer leadership of key congregations. Both local and national support from the congregational movements was essential to the development of a successful process. In particular the engagement of movement leadership opened doors to congregations that would otherwise have been closed and provided the coordination, communication and support that assured a smooth and productive process.

### **Involvement of Multiple Layers of Congregational Leadership**

The engagement of congregational leaders went beyond rabbis and congregation presidents to include educational directors, youth workers and family educators. The professional and volunteer leadership of the federation made sure to create channels of communication and regular meetings with these professionals, as well as with other congregational leaders.

### **Persistence, Focus, Feedback and Research**

As noted above, CJP and the Commission were in it for the long haul. None of our projects started successful. All were initially flawed. All required consistent momentum, feedback, research and support from the top over many years before they began to achieve measurable success. All continued to evolve over time. Significant funds were invested in research and evaluation, which created a feedback loop that led to ongoing improvement in each project.

### **Vision and Change**

If you don't know where you're going any road will get you there. The Commission on Jewish Continuity began with a number of hypotheses based on years of observation and research. We began with a vision and a clear sense of direction. We believed that family education could be transformational and that Israel travel, intensive Jewish summer camping, and youth work were powerful tools for building Jewish identity. We believed that the impact of these programs would expand geometrically, if they were implemented together in the same congregation and if they could be rooted in the congregational culture as part of a total Jewish educational experience. We started with real and reasonable ideas. We did not simply ask congregations what they needed or offer start up grants for innovation. We made big, across the board bets on big ideas with a high probability of success in many congregations at the same time.

In the area of family education, for example, we began with small-scale experiments but moved quickly to funding half the cost of full-time trained family educators in congregations across the community. In other words, we never tried to find the perfect family education program through innovative program grants. Instead, we tried to institutionalize the idea of family education and provided training and opportunities for sharing and consultation to encourage the evolution of better models over time. We

also created a learning network for new professionals and plenty of opportunity for them to learn together. We over-seeded the field to assure the emergence of some excellent models that could be replicated and expanded through contact with other congregations. The goal was not the perfect family education program. It was the development of an excellent community-wide process that would make family education a standard, institutionalized part of most schools, most congregations and most families' Jewish educational experience.

But we also stayed open to change, adding outreach to interfaith families, Building Caring Communities, the JRNI project, our social justice initiative and universal adult Jewish literacy as we went along. Needless to say, our initial plans for our projects changed frequently over time so that our family and youth educator initiatives look quite different today from our starting point hypotheses.

### **"Tipping Points" and Assuring a Critical Mass for Change**

One of the weaknesses of many existing synagogue change efforts is that they attempt to create individual change projects in individual congregations often in different cities. In these instances, congregations frequently compete with other congregations for funding, with only the winner allowed to try the innovation. Our approach was to announce up front our intention to implement new projects across the board in as many congregations as wanted to participate with a funding model that required at least 50/50 congregational participation. Moreover, structured opportunities for sharing and ongoing consultation through the Hebrew College and the Bureau of Jewish Education were provided to share ideas and success stories and improve the model over time. We now have more than 22 full-time family educators and nearly as many full-time youth workers. Some are better used than others and not all are what I would view as completely or even mostly successful, but they are all evolving over time, and enough variations and successes exist to assure real progress throughout the community. Moreover, if a particular congregation drops out or loses a key rabbi, staff person or major volunteer, the model continues to exist in the community for potential re-adoption later on. The existence of many replicable models provides a much greater evolutionary chance for success and improvement over time.

Even more importantly the existence of many variants in many congregations provides the potential for creating a real community wide “tipping point” of attitude change. This is beginning to happen in Boston as the widespread engagement of multiple leadership elites (and ordinary congregants) in the *Me’ah* Program has made Jewish literacy a mark of real status in our Jewish community, with adult Jewish learning at the edge of becoming a communal norm.

### **Funding, Staffing and Turn-Key Initiatives**

If the mission of our congregational movements today is the spiritual, intellectual and ethical transformation of most congregants and the creation of real Jewish community, most congregations are neither funded nor staffed to provide any hope of success. Moreover, most rabbis and leaders were raised in old paradigm congregations, making it difficult for them to even envision the structure, funding or staffing necessary to succeed.

Often in synagogue change processes, consultants help congregational leadership envision new goals like adult education or family education or informal education for children. But then at the moment of implementation, they leave them powerless to implement high quality, sustainable programs due to lack of funding or staffing or the availability of easily implementable models. It does little good to turn a congregation on to serious Jewish adult education and then leave them with the same program and teachers that have always been available but have had limited impact.

CJP and the Commission on Jewish Continuity therefore offered serious incentives for congregations to hire new full-time staff for specific tasks (youth work and family education) and incentives for Israel experiences. The Commission also developed full-blown turn-key programs like *Me’ah* (a two-year Wexner Heritage type adult learning experience) which were designed to be integrated into any congregation desiring to participate.

### **Ongoing Consultation and Support**

The Commission on Jewish Continuity with our partners at the Bureau of Jewish Education and the Hebrew College and the Synagogue Council provide support, feedback, coordination, consultation and help to assure success over time.

## **THE CONTENT OF CHANGE**

### **Universal Adult Jewish Literacy**

A community that has no cultural, intellectual or spiritual memory has no future. The creation of “communities of learning” will require a change in our communal culture. In America, we have built great and sophisticated public and private school systems to transmit secular learning and the values of western culture to each generation. We have done so because our parents believed in America and in western civilization. Only if we truly believe in the importance of our communal memory, our Jewish culture, our *Torah* and its ability to give our lives beauty and meaning, can we truly create communities of Jewish learning.

Expanding Jewish adult education is key to the overall goal of building broad communal support for Jewish education. Only a community filled with adults who love Jewish learning and find meaning for their own lives in Jewish knowledge will create universal Jewish literacy for their children and grandchildren. Only a community that sees the literary beauty of the Bible as clearly as it sees the beauty in Shakespeare will raise a generation of Jews who are Jewishly literate as well as masters of Western Civilization and culture. In Boston, the federation will pay half the cost of a full-time family educator for any interested congregation (we are already in more than 30 congregations!) as well as half the cost of *Me’ah*, our gold standard adult learning experience which currently reaches 700 adults a year in 20 congregations.

Strengthening serious intensive and comprehensive Jewish learning for adults (rather than the episodic and uncoordinated efforts that usually pass for adult education), particularly at congregations, must become a far higher priority if we are to assure the success of our Jewish renaissance. The Wexner Heritage Program, *Me’ah* and the Melton Adult Mini School all provide useful models for serious comprehensive adult learning of the kind that must become normative for American Jews.

*Me’ah* (A Hundred Hours of Jewish Learning), developed by our Hebrew College and its leader David Gordis, is modeled loosely on the Wexner Heritage Program (Bible, rabbinics, Jewish history and Jewish philosophy – two years, 25 weeks per year, two and one-half hours in the classroom and two hours of homework per week!). Our

goal was simply to make every Jew in every congregation in Boston a literate Jew – universal Jewish literacy. It started with 40 participants and grew to 700 participants per year within four years. The demand has been enormous, a symbol of the Jewish community’s hunger for serious Jewish learning and meaning. It has spread from congregation to congregation across Greater Boston. More importantly, the reality structure of Boston Jewry has begun to change with far more Jews believing in the power of Jewish learning to bring meaning and intellectual satisfaction to their lives.

A groundbreaking recent study on adult Jewish learning found that most Jews expressed a preference for very short-term learning experiences focused on popular topics like Jewish cooking and the Holocaust. That indeed is the limited scope of many congregational programs marked by very limited expectations of congregants. But market research is an inadequate guide to the real needs of our Jewish people. We can and must understand our congregants as a community that can be inspired by leadership and by an elevated vision of Jewish life. If we had depended on market research in 1995 in Boston, we would never have created *Me’ah* and that would have been a tragedy.

Small face-to-face communities, particularly synagogues, already educate most of our community’s children. But they can be much more. They can become, in Isa Aron’s words, “congregations of learners” and the central carrier of culture and learning for us and for our children.

By surrounding ourselves with learning, particularly sophisticated and comprehensive adult education, we can change the norms of Jewish life and the attitudes we transmit to our children. But the reverse is also true. The process of learning together itself creates community. For the Jewish people, learning can be an intimate act of self-discovery that strengthens the ties that bind us together. Our communities can create opportunities for learning just as learning itself creates community.

### **Integrating Formal and Informal Jewish Education: Creating a Total Educational Environment**

Congregation-based afternoon school education is the most widespread form of Jewish education in America. The goal of educational and communal policy must be the transformation of congregational education through an overall strategy designed to make each congregation a

total educational environment – carefully orchestrating the work of highly trained professionals (rabbis, educators, family educators and youth workers) and programs (services, schools, youth movements, movement camps, targeted intensive adult education aimed at young families, and adult/family education programs). The distinction between formal and informal education must be erased and we must move to assure as much support and funding for high impact and high potential Jewish camps, Israel learning experiences, youth activity, and family and adult education as we currently provide for our highly problematic afternoon school efforts.

In essence, we are seeking to create a new synagogue structure that makes an intensive family integration/education experience, exciting services, excellent schools, intensive Jewish summer camping, powerful youth groups and Israel experiences for teens a standard, automatic, integrated part of our educational programs, just as the after school/Sunday school experience is a standard, well-funded [contended point – distracting], and required part of congregational life. The Commission on Jewish Continuity in Boston has worked to transform the relationship between federations and synagogues so that new incentives can be made available to congregations to create this integrated structure.

### **A Strategy for Youth Education**

Teens are among the fastest growing cohorts of American Jews and they’re also the most vulnerable. Far too many teens drop out at age 13 and Jewish education will simply fail if we can’t retain and inspire our youth. Programs that place trained full-time youth workers in every synagogue will be critical to success, as will strategies that integrate youth groups, camping and Israel experiences. Simply put, the more youngsters that participate in intensive Jewish summer camping, the more teens that will participate in youth group experiences. The more youth group activity, the more teens go to Israel; and the more teens go to Israel, the stronger our youth groups, and so on.

And of course, all of this is well within our capacity to envision and to accomplish. In Boston, the Robert and Myra Kraft Passport to Israel Incentive Savings Program and some very dedicated congregations have vastly increased the pool of Israel bound teens. The Grinspoon Foundation’s camp incentive program has significantly increased camp participation in Western Massachusetts.



Most significantly CJP's Youth Educator Initiative has increased the number of full-time trained youth workers in congregations in Boston from two to 11 in only four years with four additional half-time workers also developed through the program. Our goal must be integrated camp, Israel, and youth group experiences for every teen.

### **Caring Communities**

The creation of compassionate, face-to-face communities through which we care for each other – visiting the sick and lonely, comforting the bereaved, aiding those in need, welcoming new members – clearly represents a core agenda for congregational life. The Willow Creek Community Church outside Chicago is now among the most successful in the country, but at the start, it was failing. Research revealed its core failure as a community. Members felt uncared for and unwelcome. They felt that the Church was more interested in their money than in themselves as people.

Change will require a radical new focus on welcome and caring as core values of Jewish life. For this to happen, the typical *Chesed* committees of synagogue life will require far more work. The Willow Creek Community Church has 7,000 volunteers under the guidance of 100 professional staff to create a sense of real caring and community for its 30,000 members. It didn't happen by accident. In Boston, CJP's human service agencies have begun to bring their services into congregations and CJP's Commission on Jewish Continuity is developing plans to fund full-time volunteer coordinators for congregations to test the applicability of the Willow Creek model.

### **Communities of Justice**

A Jewish community that focuses solely on its own needs ignores its most basic historical, Biblical and prophetic mandate. The pursuit of *Tikkun Olam*, social action – the repair of the world for our neighbors and for all humankind – is an essential element of Jewish community-building because it is at the core of the covenant between Abraham and God, and because working together in a great cause itself builds community. This value must guide us to actively involve our congregants in advocacy and service projects that engage them in repairing the world. But most congregational social justice efforts are understaffed and underfunded and limited. In Boston, the Jewish Community Relations Council has recruited 700 volunteers – most through congregationally based out-

reach efforts – to tutor inner city youngsters on a weekly basis and build bridges to inner city churches. Plans are already being developed to test full-time, federation funded, social justice coordinators to build this critical element of our congregational and communal vision.

### **Broadening the Base of Community: Outreach to Interfaith Households**

Since 1997, CJP has partnered with congregations and congregational movements (especially the Northeast Region of the UAHC) in an extensive program of outreach to interfaith households. This partnership and significant federation funding has vastly increased the scope of congregational outreach efforts reaching more than 1,300 people and generating a great deal of serious interest in Judaism in households that have already opted to live Jewish lives as well as those who are exploring Jewish alternatives.

### **Federation Engagement and Synagogue Change**

The total scope of CJP-synagogue engagement is exceptionally broad, encompassing 13 different programs in formal and informal Jewish education; 10 in social justice, and 21 aimed at creating and sustaining caring communities. The total CJP investment in these programs is over \$2 million, touching 70 synagogue and day school sites and tens of thousands of synagogue members. The sum total of programmatic investment is enormous but still requires structural change within congregations and federation to be fully effective. To achieve higher levels of impact, we've created two programs to examine the overall structure of congregational organizational life and facilitate thoughtful change. JRNI – the Jewish Resource Network Initiative aims at overall congregational change while also seeking to strengthen the congregation's ability to welcome, serve, care for and engage its members.

The Advancing Congregational Educational (ACE) Initiative offers intensive consultative services and extended grants that enable synagogues to experiment with comprehensive new models for congregational education. Beginning with the congregational school, ACE seeks to expand and deepen opportunities for lifelong Jewish learning by linking formal and informal, family and classroom education into a coherent whole which is guided by a team of professional Jewish educators and engaged lay leaders.

Finally and most importantly, CJP and our congregations are sponsoring the JRNI Leadership Development Institute.

JRNI's Leadership Development Institute (LDI) will seek to engage, inspire and support lay leadership throughout Greater Boston's Jewish community. Our goal is to raise the sights of current and next generation leadership to see beyond today's Jewish communal world and envision newly energized communities of Jewish life. The Leadership Development Institute and is designed to bring university level leadership training and business expertise to congregational leadership. Faculty from Harvard Business School, the Kennedy School at Harvard, and Brandeis University have already been involved in this process. Without the best and brightest volunteer leaders, trained and engaged, all other efforts at synagogue change must surely fail.

## THE FEDERATION: A COMMUNITY OF COMMUNITIES

### The Federation Network

Vibrant synagogue communities are enhanced by vibrant, creative, supportive federations. Synagogues and other gateway communities need federations to create a community of communities in order to broaden their vision, preventing them from becoming narrow and parochial. They need umbrella institutions that symbolize *K'lal Yisroel*, the community if Israel – enabling their members to feel and understand that they are part of a broader Jewish community linking Jews in every synagogue and organization to a more inclusive network that includes Jews in other organizations: unaffiliated Jews throughout the greater community; the entire American Jewish community; the world Jewish community and ultimately the community which Robert Bellah describes as the “community of all humankind.” The federation therefore becomes a network and the key connector between local grassroots organizations and the broader Jewish world without which Judaism loses much of its meaning and power.

To meet the needs of a larger and more inclusive Jewish community and to be a real presence, a real central address, a real community of communities, I would suggest that federations must begin to look more like networks than concentric circles or pyramids; that information and funds must flow through these networks, con-

necting donors and needs; recipients and givers; that knowledge, ideas and vision must replace emergencies, power, money and coercion as the primary forces that hold communities together. In the future the most powerful and influential federations will be those that favor autonomy and that give power away, rather than those that hold power in and dominate their systems.

### Connecting Jews: The Tipping Point and The Power to Make Change

The Jewish community is far more tightly connected than most of us believe. The most alienated Jews are probably not much more than two degrees of separation from the most affiliated. Moreover, these states are highly dynamic as people move between levels of connection depending on their place in the family lifecycle and their relationships with influentials and congregations that connect them to the Jewish community and who also influence their attitudes.

The Network concept and the close connection between affiliated and unaffiliated Jews it suggests also challenges the idea that the community consists of disconnected concentric circles with committed Jews at the core and unaffiliated, unreachable Jews at the periphery. This is the central insight developed by Rabbi Hayim Herring in his excellent paper, “Network Judaism: A New Image for Understanding the Organization of American Jews,” prepared as part of a Wilstein Institute symposium on the network idea.

*The Tipping Point*, by Malcolm Gladwell, provides additional critical insight into the networks that tie our lives and our communities together. Gladwell suggests ways that beliefs within communities can be tipped, changing attitudes and reshaping social reality structures. He describes three rules of epidemics: the law of the few, the stickiness factor, and the power of context. He believes that by understanding these factors we can change the social reality in which we live. In his words, “little things can make a big difference.”

**What must underlie successful social change in the end is a bedrock belief that change is possible, that people can radically transform their behavior or beliefs in the face of the right kind of impetus.... We are actually powerfully influenced by our surroundings, our immediate context, and the personalities of those around us.... That's why social**

change is so volatile and so often inexplicable because it is the nature of all of us to be volatile and inexplicable.

But if there is difficulty and volatility in the world of *The Tipping Point*, there is a large measure of hopefulness as well. Merely by manipulating the size of a group, we can dramatically improve its receptivity to new ideas. By tinkering with a presentation of information, we can significantly improve its stickiness. Simply by finding and reaching those few special people who hold so much social power, we can shape the course of social change. In the end, Tipping Points are a reaffirmation of the potential for change and the power of intelligent action. Look at the world around you. It may seem like an immovable, implacable place. It is not. With the slightest push — in just the right place, it can be tipped.

And isn't that exactly our challenge? Somehow we are called upon to join in a revolution that must reshape the attitudes of a generation hungry for meaning, but not knowing where to find it and searching for community, but not knowing quite how to create it. As part of this larger struggle we are testing the proposition that our federation and congregational movements have a role to play in this great adventure. At the heart of Gladwell's idea is "the law of the few." He suggests that our society is tied together by relatively few connectors, really key influentials who seem to know everybody and who carry messages and ideas across vast distances with amazing speed and accuracy. He also describes mavens who seem to know everything and who carry the content of these ideas and salespeople who close the sale and drive the new ideas home. Federations and congregations control vast financial resources but they also influence even more potent human resources. By understanding these human resources and the way they and communal agencies and institutions connect our community network, we can strengthen communal life and help drive the revolution of *Torah*, *Tzedek* and *Chesed* upon which the future of Jewish communal life can be built.

Several years ago, the Boston Hebrew College and CJP created *Me'ah*, the remarkable adult education program described earlier in this paper. The program developed without much advertising or print media, no electronic media and limited direct mail. But we started the program

in its first years in two highly visible, fast growing young affluent congregations and targeted to the extent possible younger, more visible congregants. It spread from congregation to congregation across Greater Boston. The results were extraordinary. The program already has over 1,000 graduates and the name *Me'ah* is recognized across Jewish Boston. More importantly, the reality structure of Boston Jewry has begun to tip with far more Jews believing in the power of Jewish learning to bring meaning and intellectual satisfaction to our lives. Of course, this would not have happened if the Hebrew College had not created an extraordinary product. But the placement strategy within congregations and word-of-mouth contagion must also be credited with the program's success.

### **The Synagogue Partnership and the Communal Network**

Synagogues and congregations are the most widespread form of grassroots communal organization available to American Jews. All surveys show that American Jews continue to feel closer to their congregations than to any other form of Jewish organizational life and Jews of all kinds — inmarried and intermarried, Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist and unaffiliated — continue to form synagogues largely out of their own volunteer energy, from renewed urban communities to the small synagogues that are forming in developing suburbs. These congregations must further develop their community building capacity before they can fulfill their potential as an important component of a Jewish renaissance network, but many are showing surprising energy, reflecting the power of volunteers who are hungry for real community and spiritual meaning in their lives.

## **CREATING A TIPPING POINT OF JEWISH COMMUNITY AND JEWISH MEANING**

Against all odds the Jewish people have carried a powerful message of hope within a strong communal network for over 2,000 years. In a time that lacks vision and prophecy and that yearns for meaning, we're carrying an ancient faith in an ancient God so that our children and grandchildren will have spiritual options to fill their lives with light and joy.

In a time of greed and selfishness, we're part of an old — a very old — tradition of caring for strangers, love of the poor and oppressed, and responsibility for widows and orphans, the elderly and handicapped.

In a time of forgetfulness, we're part of the oldest living chain of learning and literature in the world, inheritors of an ancient and hauntingly beautiful culture.

In a time of anomie and loneliness, we carry the secret of community and caring to provide our children and grandchildren a sense of belonging.

In a time of rootlessness and alienation, we're connected to a 3500-year-old history and an infinite future.

Federations and congregations have a powerful role to play in renewing this message and strengthening and reshaping our communal network. If we carry out this great work with spirit and vision, we will create a tipping point of Jewish learning and community and justice, we will succeed in our great mission, and future generations will bless us for our work and our vision.

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Barry Shrage is the President of Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston.

**Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:**

- Shrage describes a model in which federations and synagogues are dependent on one another.
  - In what ways do federations need strong synagogues according to Shrage, and in what ways do synagogues need vibrant federations?
  - Is this the way the relationship is conceived in your community?
  - What are the risks and benefits of active federation involvement in synagogue change?
- Shrage asserts that “Judaism is a life based in community.” What are the implications of this idea for Jewish education?
- In what ways is the case of Boston unique in your opinion? In what ways was their success attributable to leadership, optimism, and focus? What would you like to ask Shrage about the Boston experience that would help you to make the connection to your own community's realities?

- The article describes “a conscious movement from experimentation to institutionalized change.” Why was this important? Is your community ready for this shift?
- Shrage writes that Boston invested significantly in research and evaluation, functioning as a “learning organization” on many levels. To what extent does your community seek feedback and constant monitoring of results? To what extent are you flexible and able to adjust to changing realities and understandings?

Shrage cites Malcolm Gladwell's statement, “What must underlie successful social change in the end is a bedrock belief that change is possible...” Is this bedrock belief characteristic of your community's leadership? Do you as a group share this level of optimism? What are the obstacles to change on the communal level?