

JEWISH LEADERSHIP AND THE JEWISH RENAISSANCE

New Challenges for Leadership Development

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Today, the core affirmation of Jewish leadership development programs is that those who aspire to Jewish leadership must be Jewishly literate. However, Jewish literacy alone is not sufficient to guarantee effective leadership. The curriculum therefore should encompass what leaders need to know and experience to enable them to build vibrant Jewish communities, thereby allowing others to participate in the processes of Jewish growth.

In a very real sense, leadership development brought me to Brandeis University and seven years of learning from and with Bernard Reisman. As a rather obscure Jewish studies professor at Carleton College in Minnesota, it is unlikely that I would have come to Bernie's attention when Brandeis sought to fill a faculty position in the Hornstein Program in Jewish Communal Service were it not for the work I had done for the Council of Jewish Federations designing and conducting a new "model" leadership development program dealing with contemporary Jewish issues. (How I came to be doing that at all is another story—but not for this essay.) In turn, the attractiveness of the opportunity to go to Brandeis was enhanced by Bernie's indicating that one of my job assignments would be to help Hornstein develop programs in continuing education for Jewish leadership.

During my years at Brandeis, Bernie, I, and other colleagues did indeed put in place the first pieces of what has become a rich array of advanced leadership development programs for both professionals and volunteers now sponsored by the Hornstein Program. We began such programs as the Distinguished Leaders Institute and Sherman Seminar for Outstanding Young Professionals, which continue to this day. We also mounted a variety of other institutes for rabbis, Jewish educators, communal professionals, and lay leaders. Together with the efforts of many others, these programs helped shape

a new culture of expectations and opportunities for Jewish leaders to enhance their capabilities and to grow as Jews.

Thinking back over the past twenty-plus years of my own involvement, it seems clear to me that the most important theme in the evolution of leadership development during this period is the ever-growing emphasis on Jewish literacy. Early on, the issue was approached somewhat gingerly and in small doses. In the mid-1970s, most federation leadership development programs combined practical orientations to the work of federation and its agencies, some skills development, and perhaps some introduction to current Jewish issues and/or explorations of personal Jewish identity. Jewish learning in any traditional sense was not a goal or expectation. The first program I designed was billed as an innovation because it used a "scholar in residence," though, to be candid, it was pretty light on Judaic substance. CLAL came along and began to make Jewish study an intrinsic and attractive centerpiece of its leadership training sessions. Today, the "Cadillac" of leadership development programs, the Wexner Heritage program, is almost entirely about intensive Jewish learning. Its core affirmation is that those who aspire to be Jewish leaders *must* be Jewishly literate—a dramatic reversal of the implicit assumptions operative only a few decades ago.

This transformation in the normative content of Jewish leadership development programming clearly parallels the overall shift

in this Jewish community's public agenda during this period. I do not foresee having to fight again the battle over whether Jewish learning *really* is an important requisite for Jewish leadership and hence for leadership development programs, whether introductory or advanced. But, having won this point, there still remains an enormous challenge: How do we integrate the commitment to helping leaders increase their Jewish knowledge and understanding into a larger framework of leadership development, one that enables them to function effectively as leaders in a dramatically changed Jewish environment? If we cannot today imagine leadership development without Jewish learning, it is nevertheless also true that Jewish literacy alone is not enough to guarantee effective institutional or communal stewardship. This is especially true at the advanced level, where leaders are expected to exercise significant influence over the direction of Jewish policy.

Let me expand a bit. We need to start, I believe, with a sense of where we are today as a community. The good news is that, at its core, today's community is almost certainly the strongest Jewish community in American history. We have an elaborate—some might say, overelaborate—institutional structure. America's Jews are by and large prosperous, secure, and comfortable both in their Americanness and Jewishness. (The exceptions to this rule, though perhaps relatively small in number, most definitely continue to need and merit the community's concern and support.) In manifold ways, Jewish spiritual and intellectual life is flourishing, although we justifiably worry that many Jews neither participate in nor care about the creative opportunities available to nurture and express their Jewishness.

We are a strong community, but not one whose future can be taken for granted. For me, the concern is less the classic ones of assimilation and intermarriage, but rather, subtle, though by now widely recognized, shifts taking place in the nature of Jewishness as Americans understand and practice it. The net increase in Jewish energy over the past several years has been accompanied by an

increase in entropy. As a collective system, we are less capable of working effectively together. The symptoms of this change are to be seen in phenomena ranging from the rise in denominational fragmentation and tension to the declining role of central community campaigns. But the changes go much deeper. Jewish life today is lived more individualistically than a generation ago. History and the public agenda speak less powerfully. The quest for personal meaning, more than a sense of group belonging, is the criterion by which choices of lifestyle and behavior are made. The family, not Jewish institutional life, is the arena in which and on which Jewish energies are focused. Hence, it is more difficult to bring and keep Jews together for collective action. Even highly committed Jews find it difficult to forge broad shared agendas. In Jewish education today, partisans of day schools, congregational education, Israel experiences, early childhood education, summer camping, and other worthy causes too often find themselves contending over whose favored mode or setting is *the* most effective, important, and worthy of expanded communal and philanthropic support.

The "personalism" of Jews today is by no means a wholly negative phenomenon. If Judaism cannot supply personal meaning to disparate individuals, if it cannot evoke some measure of deep feeling, it is doomed in today's world. Indifference, a sense that Judaism is irrelevant to our personal lives (what in survey language we might call "just Jewish-ism"), remains our greatest enemy. What is happening in Jewish life is complex and multifaceted. Certainly, if one looks at the Jewish populace as a whole, we are faced with cross-cutting trends. Some Jews are living at or beyond the margins of what we think of as the Jewish community. These are the Jews we worry about when we bemoan assimilation. (The term and concept are, I believe, seriously flawed as tools for explicating what is happening today, but can still be used as a shorthand for pointing to the not-insubstantial number of Jews who manifest little overtly Jewish behavior in their lives.)

But, as noted above, the other side of the story today is the also not-insubstantial numbers of Jews who are actively engaged in seeking to forge personally meaningful Jewish identities. Some of these individuals look like conventionally committed Jews: They belong to synagogues and Jewish organizations; they engage in some number of ritual observances; and they contribute to Jewish causes. But for many of these, and for many others who do not look like conventional Jews, the personalist and constructivist character of Jewish identity development today gives their Jewishness a dynamic, fluid, idiosyncratic quality that challenges institutions to stay apace with and relevant to their individual Jewish journeys.

Jewish institutions and communities are being asked to take on a multiplicity of tasks—some pulling in opposite directions. They must be rich, nurturing Jewish environments for those who are vigorously engaged in growing as Jews while appreciating that this growth will itself be taking place along different axes for different Jews. They must also be attractive and welcoming to those who are seeking connections, but are not yet sure of the direction or even whether to embark on a serious Jewish journey. They must satisfy the needs of activists, who are the lifeblood of institutional vitality, and yet avoid becoming closed-in communities of initiates who intentionally or inadvertently exclude those who may embody different sensibilities. Institutions and even local communities must generate sufficient loyalty among participants and members to create a counterweight to the ethos of consumerism, which renders all commitment contingent and temporary. At the same time, institutions must recognize that isolationism and attempts to assert proprietary ownership over individual Jews ultimately render them and the Jewish community as a whole less capable of escorting and assisting these Jews along the full length of their journeys.

The work of creating and guiding institutions and communities able to meet these multiple challenges is what Jewish leadership today is all about. In an age of dynamic Judaism, when it is not unrealistic to speak of

the potential for a Jewish renaissance in North America and globally, direct personal participation in the excitement of Jewish growth surely is a desideratum, if not a requisite, for Jewish leaders. Hence, there is every reason to seek to reinforce those trends over the past two decades that have placed ongoing Jewish learning—as well as exploration of Jewish spirituality and an expansive vision of personal Jewish activism—at the heart of the curriculum for leadership development. But, we need to go beyond the personal. If leadership development is seen only as a tool for enhancing the participants' own Jewishness—important as this is—it risks becoming self-indulgent, elitist in the negative sense of that term, and even capable of creating a barrier between leaders and those whom they need to reach out to, engage, guide, and support.

The true test of leadership is the ability to translate compelling personal experience into the regularities of institutional life, thereby allowing others to participate in the processes of Jewish growth. This requires a kind of “second-order” learning, the focus of which is on the building of vibrant Jewish communities, communities that can engage individuals who are coming from diverse places with diverse aspirations and draw them into connections with other Jews that are both satisfying and enduring. It is this second-order learning, I would suggest, that constitutes the most important curriculum for volunteer leadership development and professional training today.

The good news is that we already know a great deal about what the work of Jewish community-building entails, even in the new circumstances in which we live today. The primary thrusts of this work remain what they have always been: on the one hand, helping diverse Jews discover a shared purpose and vision that inspire collective effort that is at the same time personally meaningful, and, on the other, encouraging Jews to support each other in their individual efforts to relate to and pursue that which is ultimately meaningful in their lives. Classical Judaism balances and synthesizes individualism and collectiv-

ism in its understanding of true community, and this continues to be a worthy and elusive ideal to pursue in our own community-building efforts.

It is the *tachlis*, not the theory, of community-building that is so challenging today. What are the shared purposes and visions that can draw Jews together for common action? In a time when our spiritual quests take on so many different and even contradictory forms, how can we be genuinely supportive of one another's journeys? That the answers are not obvious is itself perhaps the clue to how to move forward. *Leadership development today should be about asking precisely these questions and endeavoring to answer them, if only provisionally, in the concrete work of Jewish institutional and communal transformation.*

There is today a vast literature on organizational change. One of the key insights that emerges from this literature is that change is ultimately about and predicated on learning. The *learning organization* is the paradigm for an organization capable of thriving in an environment of continuous change. In the Jewish world, this paradigm already informs some of the most exciting initiatives in institutional/communal change—the Reform movement's Experiment in Congregational Education; Synagogue 2000; and continuity initiatives in Boston, New York, and Minneapolis—with learning being understood and pursued in two keys: the *Jewish* learning that is essential to shaping authentic Jewish visions and sustaining Jewish growth and the *institutional* learning that enables these visions and commitment to supporting Jewish growth to become embodied ever more deeply in organizational purposes, culture, and behavior.

The curriculum for Jewish leadership development should therefore encompass what leaders need to know and experience in order to guide their institutions and communities through processes of change aimed at making them more vibrant Jewish communities. This means Jewish learning and a good deal more. Leadership development should include the

following components:

- serious exploration of the sociology of contemporary Jewry, the dynamics of group and institutional life, and change theory
- structured opportunities for personal and collective introspection, for encounters with other Jews whose Jewish visions may differ, and for testing and refinement of their skills as community-builders
- thoughtful consideration of the particularities of diverse institutions—synagogues, federation, JCCs, schools, etc.—to understand better what each needs in order to thrive
- attention to the challenges involved in forging “a community of communities”—the kinds of productive collaborations among institutions and ideologies that allow us to connect more meaningfully with more Jews over longer periods of time than any single institution can possibly hope to
- grappling with what is perhaps the ultimate challenge we face as a community in an individualistic age: making the collective dimensions of Jewish life—the concept of Jewish peoplehood and our connection with Israel—personally meaningful

In one sense, this is a very traditional model of leadership development, not so far removed from what has been attempted for decades. But, the truth is, it is too rarely being done and, certainly, even more rarely being done well today. Consider this concrete example. New initiatives in adult Jewish learning—whether framed as part of leadership development or not—have indeed created a growing cadre of Jews who understand and appreciate the informing and transforming power of Jewish study. But almost nowhere in the Jewish world are the participants in such programs being prepared to lead the much-needed effort to transform hundreds of schools, congregations, and other educational settings into compelling and effective Jewish learning communities. There is a palpable gap between what these leaders and others are experiencing in the way of high-quality Jew-

ish learning and what they are able to bring to whatever formal roles they play as "Jewish educational leaders." In part, this gap reflects the enormous complexity of the task itself. Creating consistently great schools or other educational institutions is difficult and expensive. But in part, it simply reflects the fact that in Jewish education at least, the real challenges of leadership development have not yet been taken on seriously. Happily, in other arenas of Jewish life, somewhat more progress has been made, but there is still a long way to go.

As I reflect on the contours of the "advanced leadership development" initiative that Bernie Reisman initiated two decades ago at Brandeis, I see five guiding principles that strike me as still applicable today as we design Jewish leadership development for an era of Jewish renaissance.

1. Leadership development must help Jewish leaders forge a personal vision that guides their own Jewish journeys *and* their work as leaders. It must help leaders answer the questions: Where do I want to go as a Jew, and where do I want to help guide others? The answer to these questions will not be a product of traditional Jewish learning alone, although the encounter with Jewish texts, history, and thought is indispensable to shaping an authentic Jewish vision. It must reflect a serious grappling with how Jewish tradition and contemporary reality (in all its multifarious complexity) intersect. Having such a vision is the difference between (in Bernie's words) being a "technician" and a "statesman."
2. Leadership development must help Jewish leaders shape *shared* visions. The struggle and excitement of seeking and finding commonalities in what we value as Jews and in how we are prepared to work to see these values realized are essential to maintaining the morale of leaders, the vibrancy of institutions, and the central place of community in Jewish life. Developing shared visions is hard work that requires time, skilled facilitation, and a commitment to talking together about topics that excite passions.
3. Leadership development must take place in the context of doing. The notion that leadership development is preparation for something that one *will* do, rather than sustained reflection on what one is already doing (with others), is outmoded. Life and circumstance change so quickly that leadership development must be a lifetime endeavor, part of the continuous learning that Judaism insists upon.
4. Leadership development must be presented as a privilege, not a burden; an opportunity, not just a responsibility. The process of leadership development, if done well, can be intrinsically rewarding. Leaders at every stage in their lives and careers have the potential to grow and to become engaged deeply and enthusiastically in the process of doing so. The challenge to designers of leadership development programs is to tap this potential. This requires a rigorous insistence on quality in both design and implementation.
5. Leadership development is itself about building Jewish community. The personal relationships among participants, and between participants and teachers, are no less important than the curriculum. Opportunities to celebrate together complement learning together. In the end, what we model is the most powerful form of learning, and we learn to build community by being a community.

These are not new ideas. Bernie Reisman has been teaching them for years to students preparing to be professional communal workers, to volunteer leaders, and to the Jewish community as a whole. Times change, but fundamental values and human realities do not. And, neither do the challenges of turning these fundamentals into action that can strengthen and enrich Jewish life. This is what Bernie has done throughout his career, and now it is our privilege and responsibility to continue this work.