JEWISH LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

Courageous Leadership Now: An Urgent Agenda for the Jewish Community and its Institutions

By Yehuda Kurtzer

The COVID-19 crisis is functioning everywhere as a referendum on the quality of our leadership. This is visibly the case on global, national, and local political levels, but is also true in Jewish communal institutions. We are tested in myriad ways, many of them unprecedented; and all of our leaders are being judged in real time against the invisible standards that are forged by our mix of needs, anxieties, and judgments.

The good news in the Jewish community is that there are extraordinary individuals stepping up in unexpected ways, and many institutions are pivoting magnificently into this moment. I have the benefit of seeing this firsthand as the spouse of one head of school, where two of my children are students, and as the parent of a third child in another school; both schools have done remarkably, almost instinctively, in moving their schools online, supporting their elaborate networks of parents, children, and teachers through this period of illness and uncertainty, and communicating with clarity about what they know and how they know it. I am also watching rabbis around the country becoming expert in providing services and support to their people in virtual ways and writing responsa to enable them to feel religiously justified in making forced choices; educators working extremely hard to close the gap between medium and method; and heads of institutions supporting their staffs and stakeholders so that they can all feel some semblance of continuity and security when everything around us feels so fragile. I have no shortage of admiration for the individuals who work in our community right now, often unseen and unrewarded.

But there is a lot of bad news as well, and some very ominous news as we look forward.

First, sometimes when we see exceptional performance by exceptional individuals, it should prompt us to ask whether this is the case because the system is not strong enough on its own to handle the most challenging elements of this crisis. I think this is patently true of the no-longer-particularly-organized Jewish community. Exceptional leaders of institutions in today's Jewish community are operating in relative isolation from one another, and certainly autonomously from one another, largely because we no longer have a strong enough system of umbrella organizations and collective

mobilization. This means we are likely to see a huge duplication of creative efforts, probably a good bit of implicit competition among Jewish organizations today in their pivots for resources and attention, and a whole host of missed opportunities.

Second, exceptional performance by individuals in crisis is not usually sustainable over a long period of time – and the COVID-19 crisis is not a short-term problem. To expect that our leaders will sustain this creative momentum over a long period of time is not only a lot to ask, but it fails to account for the fact that we as the beneficiaries of their leadership are going to change ourselves in our needs and our emotional being in relationship to them. For one week, it is reasonable to expect that a parent body will go along with imperfect experimentation with online learning by a school that has honed its craft in the classroom over a long period of time. For a week or two, it is reasonable to expect that we will continue to feel tickled by the new blitz of offerings being made available to us online to entertain and distract us. But our temperaments and our needs are likely to change quickly, and the burden on leaders will shift and grow. An 18 month horizon will dramatically alter our expectations of our leaders, and our understanding of our own needs.

And third, of most concern: most experts are anticipating a massive economic crisis to accompany the public health emergency, which has already begun. This means economic insecurity for the client/customer/membership base of many Jewish institutions, and the diminishing returns of online offerings for this base. This combination of forces, in turn, threatens the earned income and tuition revenue on which much of this system relies. It also means that the philanthropy sector will witness precipitous declines in investment-based corpuses, DAFs, and endowments, so fewer allocations and perhaps even a conservatism in allocations as well; and, reduced new donations into those instruments and into philanthropy in general. This is not to mention the fact that a huge percentage of the Jewish community works in Jewish institutions, which means that these institutions could suffer from a vicious cycle – economic insecurity makes those individuals more conservative in their support of those institutions, which furthers those individuals' own economic insecurity. If the nonprofit sector employs about 7% of the American workforce, it is reasonable to assume that the Jewish communal system employs a comparable percentage of the Jewish community.[1] This is a huge number of people and a critical mass in our community.

There have been a few important shows of strengths to date from Jewish institutional and philanthropic leadership – most notably the funder letter making several concrete commitments to the field – but I think we are also about to discover how many otherwise healthy, productive organizations in our community have been living month-to-month and will start to teeter and fall without more consistent sources of support. Even the organizations who rely on the support of the philanthropic signatories to the letter can anticipate much more instability, and for a longer time, than these funders

can reasonably make commitments to them. In most cases, anyway, the concerns for organizations are not just making payroll this month, but in trying to anticipate – impossibly – how disruptions to the work of fundraising now will come to roost 18-24 months from now. We are on the verge of a Jewish communal economic collapse, and our leaders and our institutions require our support.

In response, I believe it is urgent that Jewish communal leadership responds to this crisis with a major effort towards *collective mobilization*. By collective mobilization I mean a temporary, purpose-oriented alignment by major communal institutions, together with the central players in independent Jewish philanthropy, organized around a coherent and clearly prioritized set of commitments. Jews in America still have the material means to respond to this crisis and to enable the Jewish communal and educational infrastructure to survive; they just need a plan, and they need to be sold on it, and it will not work – except for isolated affluent institutions – unless it is a prioritized plan that is undertaken by many entities working in collaboration.

This would be a big lift for the Jewish community. The resistance to collective mobilization comes from fear that any entity involved in leading this effort becomes ideologically and politically hegemonic. Collective mobilization has both democratic and anti-democratic elements: democratic in that in theory it engages more of the community, on behalf of the community itself; anti-democratic in that it has to make choices on behalf of the community that will benefit some and not others. I am conscious of these concerns. I am not interested in a nostalgic return to the heyday of the 20th century hegemonic federated system. There are useful reasons for its demise; and in general, I want to accept the gains that we have made as Americans and Jews in the 21st century that allow us to think beyond the limited infrastructure that helped us, in the 20th, get to this place.

But these fears must not eviscerate today's urgent agenda for collective mobilization and its constitutive elements: linking across silos in the Jewish community, pooling key resources including both capital and wisdom, and establishing some norms and a decision-tree to help guide leaders of smaller organizations navigate their difficult decisions. This is not a moment for new organizational infrastructure, merely a call for collaboration. The simple reality is that the process of atomization of Jewish identity and community in America away from collectivism and towards institutional idiosyncrasy has been good for caring for particular, micro-communal interests and needs; but it has eviscerated our ability to do something big when it comes to collective concerns.

The main activity involved in this collective mobilization effort is the raising of significant funds to enable the Jewish communal ecosystem to weather this crisis, and to prepare

us for the uncertainty that awaits us at the indeterminate end. In my view, the priority order for this funding would be:

1. An emergency campaign to raise funds for COVID-19 related services provided by and for the Jewish community through the entities in our community who do this work – our Jewish Family and Children's Services, Free Loan Societies, Vocational Services, elder housing, Food Insecurity Services, and so forth. The American Jewish community has been historically remarkable at saving lives when Jewish communities have been vulnerable around the world; many in our community now are, and are on the verge of, such existential vulnerability right now.

2. A second emergency campaign should raise and allocate the necessary funds to sustain Jewish educational, religious, and communal organizations to ensure they can make payroll through the end of the 2019-2020 academic year, inclusive of the summer. While we know that some of these institutions may not be able to survive this crisis into next year, those decisions should not be made instantly or on the backs of the professionals currently in their employ. Failure to do so will dramatically exacerbate the economic toll on our community, through the individuals who are our most valuable asset.

3. A third campaign would design and fund a multiyear adaptation strategy for the next 18-24 months for the aforementioned network of institutions. For several years there has been quiet discussion in Jewish philanthropy about the need for major reorganization in the Jewish community writ large, a "mergers and acquisitions" phase for Jewish communal life which would respond to both the trends of decentralization and innovation that have characterized the past 30 years. This process will doubtlessly be accelerated by the COVID-19 crisis, but it should happen planfully and not merely opportunistically or through the vehicle of tragic collapse. Such a process requires some measure of communication and even coordination across the network of Jewish philanthropy; it requires collaboration among thought-leaders about the needs and wants of today and tomorrow's Jewish community; and, short of establishing a decision-making body, it needs to invite some commitments by major stakeholders that would transcend selfish efforts to sustain pet projects. Without these levels of coordination, we risk seeing the emergence of a new Jewish institutional map that is made up entirely of siloed, idiosyncratic projects that benefit from the support of particular donors but can in no way serve the broad range of needs that constitute a community – including the unsexy network of institutions and offerings that constitute our foundational ground.

Put differently, and to paraphrase an insight from my colleague Rabbi Josh Ladon: the economic largesse of the past two decades has enabled the proliferation of a Jewish

communal economy that has fixated on the business of "identity formation," through education and engagement. This has been possible because American Jews have had few actual material concerns, as a broad community, like we do today; and also because, while the formal systems of Jewish education and religious life have suffered a decline in this period, their continued existence has allowed the identity industry to grow up around it and in support of it. Jewish philanthropic interests, in the words of my friend Susan Saal, climbed up Maslow's hierarchy of needs, from physiological and safety needs and towards the business of self-actualization. This focus on identity now looks like a "luxury item" relative to the real material concerns for both individuals and institutions in the Jewish community. And even our key identity-forming institutions are now facing a totally different set of needs than 'mere' program creativity: sustaining a tuition base, providing essential services to families dealing with trauma, and even the trivialities of tech support! A collectivist project could use this moment to rebalance the philanthropic investment system to analyze what makes up a healthy Jewish communal ecosystem on a local and national level, and what are the necessary institutions that have to survive; and will reorient the funding climate to enable long-term general operating support to that network of institutions for their long-term sustainability.

Any collective planning strategy will be, in some ways, paternalistic; but it also offers the possibility of charting some healthier new directions for the community at large. I think this would need to include a rethinking of philanthropic culture for the benefit of the community. This crisis is exposing the reality that a whole host of norms in the Jewish philanthropic economy – the principal behavioral driver in this reeling multi-billion dollar industry – were norms created by a period of unhealthy stability and affluence, and they are now insufficiently adaptable. For instance, we are discovering that the passion for immediate returns that is widely prevalent in Jewish philanthropy, as measured by visible metrics, now looks deeply counterproductive when we need more competent institutions right now than we do particular programs. We need competent leaders with adaptability and resilience, much more than we need specific ideological commitments or skill sets. Imagine if 24 months ago, well before the coronavirus moved us all online, there was a Jewish organization that was preparing us for the move to digital – that was ahead of the curve in accessible, web-based content for young children, proficient in technology, and animation, and pedagogy. Now what if I told you that said organization existed, but could never marshal sustainable support in the Jewish community? In the COVID-19 era, we are watching a field of Jewish education scramble – with a lot of short-term success – to move to digital, but with precious few resources built for this eventuality over the past decade. This is our equivalent to the federal government continually failing to fund new infrastructure projects, but sure to vote for FEMA funding when an emergency arises. It is well and good to rebuild after a crisis, but how often are we failing to build the communal infrastructure we need to withstand a crisis, or preparing to pivot into change when we need to?

Digital planning is just one component of competent organizational stewardship that should be universally supported – together with disaster and scenario planning, other forms of infrastructural support, a whole host of practical skills training that leaders are struggling to acquire, and reserve funds to ensure organizational sustainability in crisis. One of the questions that the funder letter prompted across the field was: if some of the practices common in the field of philanthropy could be so quickly – and nobly – suspended for this anxious moment, were they actually critical beforehand? Any planning moment in the organization Jewish community right now could make great headway in reshaping our culture to outlive this crisis.

Finally, there are other communal priorities that can be reset now as well. The COVID-19 crisis is making clear that American democracy is the most underappreciated, and perhaps most powerful force, that is currently shaping the existential realities of American Jews. This means, in part, that our Jewish community should become more political – not less – as relates to the major debates pulling apart this country; but also that it exercises that political voice with a greater emphasis on sophistication than rhetoric. The American Jewish community can and should care a lot more, and a lot more publicly, about good governance, a free press, and public health – well inside the lines of non-partisan discourse, and without merely echoing the identity- and values-based partisan activism that constitutes most of the Jewish community's domestic agenda. These commitments should be understood as vital for American Jewish surviving and thriving, alongside – if not ahead of – the classic Jewish survival considerations of supporting Israel and fighting antisemitism. To quote Isaac Luria, "there is no American Jewish wealth without American democracy, no American Jewish future without that same democracy, and a powerful Jewish self-interest in bailing out our Jewish institutions and the economy that underlies it." Today, our failure to embrace this agenda has undermined the influence that American Jews could be exercising today in an American public and political atmosphere that is starved for leadership. Instead, we are left looking inward at our own community and responding to an American crisis as though we lacked the affluence, influence, power and privilege to play a role in preventing it.

The reason for this gap is that by and large the American Jewish community does not treat any longer, as it once did, the infrastructure of American democracy as an essential Jewish concern. A useful contrast on this front is the case of the ADL, founded in the early 20th century on the premise that Jews could ensure their own safety in America most effectively by ensuring the safety of all Americans against racism, bigotry, and oppression. The theory – vital to American Jewish thriving in America in the 20th century – was that a stronger civic, democratic America was a bulwark against the threats to Jewish persons in America. We might call this a 20th century Jewish commitment to civics, and this commitment created priorities in education, life choices, philanthropy, and identity.

The Jewish community has largely drifted away from this commitment. There are, of course, major organizations who advocate and lobby on American public policy issues; and many Jews will tell you that their Jewish identity is an anchoring element in not just how they vote, but that they vote. But it is quite different when Jews advocate on the basis of specific Jewish values within a partisan landscape, than when Jews advocate for the larger framework of American democracy – and its constituent components – because a better America is better for Jews regardless of who wins at the ballot box. There are a wide set of concerns that should be thought of as existential Jewish concerns because they are existential to America, and because Jews are Americans. These include better public health and access to quality health care, a stronger social safety net to help those who fall into poverty, the ensuring of voting rights, a coherent immigration policy, a functional bureaucracy, and so forth. In our partisan climate, it may seem that any engagement in American public policy issues entails a partisan choice; but the choice not to is treat our relationship to issues of state in America as a values-based engagement and not of existential import. I think we see today quite how important good government and public health are to the Jewish community in America.

These last two suggestions – how to reevaluate the culture of philanthropy, and what a specific collective concern could do for American Jewry – are specific examples, and I'm sure there are many others. I invite them in your responses. This is a moment primarily for action, but also for a vibrant public conversation in which we can also collectively brainstorm our uncertain future.

But all of this – the big picture and the details of what could be an essential agenda for the Jewish community right now – relies on a countercultural activity for American Jews to undertake right now, and that is a provisional, even wary, commitment to some efforts of collective mobilization for a collective good. As one funder put it to me this week, if the Jewish community of (INSERT PLACE NAME HERE) was facing this level of possible collapse, we would raise the necessary funds to keep them afloat. And I wonder – will we do the same for ourselves? Will we transcend our powerfully American denominational, individualistic, fragmentary impulses to decide that the American Jewish community – one of the most remarkable success stories of Jewish history – is worth saving? Will we support the many tireless Jewish leaders out there trying to do their jobs and lead their institutions by creating a framework that both signals to them, and supports them, in not making them feel quite so alone? Jewish community is as Jewish community does, and courage in a moment like this can only happen in solidarity.[2]

The author is the President of The Shalom Hartman Institute of North America.

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