

TOGETHER WE ARE STRONGER: REFLECTIONS ON THE NATIONAL SYSTEM

By Linda Kislowicz, President & CEO, Jewish Federations of Canada – UIA 2006-2018



In these complex times, all our institutions are being challenged more than ever to prove their value and to distinguish themselves. In the Jewish communal world, the entire Federation system is being challenged. Some argue that the Federation model no longer works - that it needs to be completely rethought and reinvented. Others argue that it is still the most relevant and effective way to raise the funds required to support our vulnerable, to promote

Jewish identity, and to ensure strong ties with Israel and world Jewry. Whichever side of the argument you support, only one thing is certain – this is not a time to be complacent.

Since I became President and CEO of Jewish Federations of Canada – UIA in 2006, our Canadian national system has undergone many changes - from a new trade name reflecting changed responsibilities, to new governance structures and by-laws, to a new Israel and overseas funding model and a recalibrated fair share formula, new funding sources, new organizational structures and programs and new relationships and partnerships.

Throughout these changes, Jewish Federations of Canada – UIA has strived to find a balance between respecting history and tradition while at the same time embracing innovation and change.

Around our boardroom table, there has been meaningful discussion regarding the strategic position of Jewish Federations of Canada – UIA and the role it plays within the federation system. There is consensus that Jewish Federations of Canada – UIA:

- Serves as a national representative and convenor

- Supports and enables all aspects of the core missions of the Federation system, including fundraising, capacity building, engagement of the next generation and Israel engagement
- Provides data, programs and services for the entire Canadian federation system
- Provides a national platform and context for thought and leadership development where all Canadian communities can engage
- Educates and trains professionals, volunteer leaders and donors

But in today's changing world, one must wonder whether these functions and roles will be relevant in the future. Jewish Federations of Canada – UIA has always been cognizant that to be effective an organization, it must be responsive to the environmental context in which it operates.

Our 2012-2015 strategic plan focused on 4 pillars: Israel; Next generation; Regions; National Collective. In 2016, this platform was modified to 3 pillars (our version of al shlosa devarim) following an extensive macro review process. They are:

1- Israel Engagement Experience and Philanthropy;

2- Next Generation Campus Services and Leadership Development

3- Building National Community - a broad category that has the potential to include many constituencies such as donors, leaders, professionals, agencies and regional communities.

Over the last several years, Jewish Federations of Canada – UIA survived a course of successive and significant budget cuts. This challenging fiscal reality required the organization to develop an entrepreneurial approach to revenue development. It was through this new lens that we learned the following lessons:

1. **One size does not fit all.** We individualized our game plan for every scenario, which required significant flexibility on the one hand and a wide breadth of knowledge and skill on the other. In some instances, this meant donor enhancements, in others it meant strategic planning support and/or the opportunity to be part of a pooled or collective initiative.

2. **Our small team cannot do it all.** We leveraged the assets and talents of the entire system - knowing who could be called upon to help another community or federation. And we collaborated with our continental and international partners to leverage their assets and capacities.
3. **Alliances need tending** - We nurtured and supported vital community coalitions like the Coast-to-Coast partnership with communities in Northern Israel in Etzba Hagalil – a veritable love fest and partnership that does so much good together.
4. **Data Informs** We researched data of all kinds – demographic and attitudinal, conducting broad surveys and more in-depth focus groups for the purpose of informing our plans and decisions and enabling proper evaluation and measurement.
5. **Emergency preparedness is critical** - We successfully mobilized during multiple crises - in Israel, Canada, the United States, the Former Soviet Union and developing nations hit by natural disasters. We responded to any number of needs – from fundraising, to understanding the needs and priorities and distribution to overseeing the programs themselves.
6. **The whole is greater than the sum of its parts** - Our core Jewish value of ‘Am Echad’ (One Nation) has stood the test of time. It is by behaving like a collective, with the large helping the small, that we fundamentally understand that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Together we are stronger. Together we are louder. Together we have more power and influence and infinitely more capacity.

In my 12 years at the helm, organizational accomplishments have been numerous and include:

1. **Major donor trips and missions** From top gifts trips to Santiago, Buenos Aires, Auckland, Melbourne and Sydney, Young leadership missions to Ethiopia, Morocco, and Cuba, to Jewish Agency delegations to Kiev, Buenos Aires and Sarcelles, to ILR programs to Rome, Paris and Washington, their residual value still endures locally and nationally.
2. **The significant growth of Israel Experience programming** Canada Israel Experience continues to develop and manage new programs for niche constituencies – such as customized Birthright Israel experiences for participants with special needs and members of the LGBTQ community, and other programs such as Honeymoon Israel and Onward Israel.

3. **A stronger Israel engagement Focus** Over the past 3 years, Jewish Federations of Canada – UIA co-sponsored two conferences with JAFI and UJA Toronto that were designed to help build and share the knowledge and experience of Israel emissaries and local federations as well as facilitate the growth of the shinishinim program (Young Israel Emissaries) in multiple locations across Canada.
4. **Multiple productive national gatherings** on important social themes such as Jewish identity and advocacy on campus; Jewish poverty; aging (both boomers and frail seniors); disabilities and inclusion; and experiential Israel education.
5. **New models of Jewish student engagement on post-secondary campuses** Jewish Federations of Canada – UIA spearheaded Hillel Ontario with UJA Federation of Greater Toronto, creating a more efficient system to reach the 21,000 Jewish students on nine campuses across Ontario.
6. **Supporting the Jewish Agency Social Housing project** with the sale of 3 real estate properties in Ashkelon, Netanya and Ashdod with more sales in the pipeline.

Some of the key issues that Jewish Federations of Canada – UIA has been involved with include:

1. **Kotel** We joined with our colleagues and partners in supporting the creation of an egalitarian prayer space near the Kotel.
2. **Conversion** We expressed our deep concern regarding the potential increased centralization of authority with the chief Rabbinate, thereby disenfranchising the local Rabbis who were performing conversions in a humane and sensitive manner.
3. **African Asylum Seekers** We were encouraged by the Canadian government's response to welcoming some of the asylum seekers and equally concerned about their treatment in Israel.
4. **Key JAFI budget challenges** impacting our partnerships and other important programs – We rolled up our sleeves and lobbied for our needs on the one hand and adapted our plans to new financial realities on the other.

Going forward, I think that there are a few compelling and even existential issues that Jewish Federations of Canada – UIA needs to explore.

1. **Competition** How can Jewish Federations of Canada – UIA help federations in an increasingly crowded and competitive market?
2. **Community Connectedness** How can Jewish Federations of Canada – UIA strengthen connections among and between communities and leverage the capacities of all communities?
3. **Identity** How can Jewish Federations of Canada – UIA continue to strengthen Jewish identity and connection to Israel in a complex and increasingly polarized world?
4. **Vulnerability** How can Jewish Federations of Canada – UIA mitigate against organizational and communal vulnerability?

My time as President & CEO of Jewish Federations of Canada – UIA, punctuated by the 2nd Lebanon War, Operation Cast lead, Pillar Defence, and Protective Edge, has been the most incredible experience.

I travelled to Israel 45 times, worked with 23 federation CEOs and 7 board chairs, attended 11 General Assemblies, 36 Jewish Agency Board of Governors meetings, four International Leadership Reunions and convened 4 national conferences.

I feel that in many ways, I have been part of the history of the Jewish people. It has been a privilege to play a role in strengthening Jewish life and community locally, nationally and internationally. It has been an honour and pleasure to serve as president and CEO of Jewish Federations of Canada – UIA for the past 12 years.

I want to express my gratitude and appreciation to the seven board chairs for their dedication and commitment, you were my true partners; to the countless board members who devoted time and effort to furthering our collective agenda; and to the professional staff, partners and colleagues with whom I worked very closely and without whom I would not have been able to achieve these accomplishments. Finally, to my family, my husband Joe, my children Barry and Kally, Howie and Naomi and my 5 grandchildren Matan, Yair, Aviad, Shefa and Gabe, who have always championed my work and were there for me through thick and thin. Thank you all!!!!