

# Saving Jewish Organizations from Themselves



COMPARED with the railway systems of most advanced nations, Amtrak, America's intercity railway system reflects a pathetic reality. Sitting somewhere between private business and government service, and taking the worst aspects of each, Amtrak simply hasn't kept up—neither technologically nor in meeting evolving human needs nor with smart economics. What business is Amtrak in? Its masters are in government, the marketplace, the capital markets—everyone, that is, except the passengers it is designed to serve.

How analogous this is to the performance of American Jewish institutions, so many of which stalled out on the local tracks long ago, while the Jewish population simply left the station. Without fundamental changes, the institutions that shape American Jewish life will not only fail to thrive—they may close their doors entirely. The future of Jewish life in America depends on our

ability to confront the weaknesses of our system honestly and to invest in and incentivize organizational change in whatever ways we can.

We need to understand why, for example, so many shrinking congregations choose to slowly go out of business before considering merging with adjacent congregations. Why are supply and demand in Jewish education so misaligned, with local bureaus of Jewish education closing even as Jewish leaders call for more and better educational opportunities? Why do we have essentially zero infrastructure for supporting extraordinary Jewish talent in arts, culture, and the humanities? And why is it that not one of the top 50 places to work in the nonprofit sector is a Jewish organization?

This is especially disappointing given that we have a large body of knowledge about what differentiates dynamic and successful organizations that can successfully adapt to contemporary needs from those that cannot. World-class organizations operate with a functioning double helix: There is crystal clarity and alignment between mission, vision, and annual operating plans. They boast deep alignment between governance, management, and staff. They are user-centered and adapt frequently to meet a rapidly changing environment. The (rare) successful examples in the Jewish communal landscape follow the models of entrepreneurs who know how to refocus a mission, realign a program, create new governance structures, collaborate or merge when necessary, and otherwise meet emerging needs with creativity and adaptability.

Why aren't more Jewish organizations like this—robust, resilient, and relevant?



Jewish organizations began coalescing into the current system around the turn of the 20th century. The tremendous needs presented by the 2 million Jewish immigrants who arrived on American shores between 1881 and 1921 led to an unprecedented

proliferation of Jewish organizations. Federations soon emerged to rationalize communal life, consolidating fundraising, conducting centralized planning, and using data to inform allocations. As American social work became more professionalized, Jewish community leaders, too, sought more strategic and scientific approaches to philanthropy and service delivery.

Yet many factors militated against nurturing organizational behaviors that would have assured the long-term success of these or any of the legacy organizations now celebrating their centennials, such as the Anti-Defamation League (to fight antisemitism), Hadassah (to build up the Jewish settlements of the Yishuv, especially when it came to health care for women and children), HIAS (managing the flow of Jewish refugees to the United States), or the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (a response to the humanitarian fallout of World War I).

These organizations (and many others) were designed as mobilizations with a specific set of objectives that, once met, would lead to their closing. They were enormously successful for a period, but their success relied on a set of conditions that largely no longer prevail, which puts their future in jeopardy: They were nurtured by a generation of Jews who were strongly identified both as Jews and with Israel; they were gravely concerned with local antisemitism and global Jewish insecurity; they abided by an ethic of collective responsibility; and there was little competition for their donors' generosity or volunteer time. All this at a time when the great American museums, hospitals, and universities didn't want Jews at their board tables and were not interested in Jewish money.

All aspects of this landscape have changed. In a world of complex identities, Jewishness is, at best, only a part of the way that most Jews identify themselves. While antisemitism mutates and persists, Jews generally continue to enjoy incredible access and success in America. Young adults' connection to Israel is more tenuous and under great strain. Collective responsibility seems a quaint notion in a time of individualism and universalism. And Jews have been

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discovered: Every major arts, health-care, and higher education institution benefits greatly from engaging Jewish donors.

Jewish organizations have not adapted to these changed circumstances. The very success they enjoyed in the past has blinded them to the ways in which adaptation is necessary for future thriving. Far too many Jewish organizations lack the core elements that support organizational flexibility and success: strong board governance, healthy staff cultures, and data-informed decision-making. The communities these institutions are supposed to serve are the stakeholders who come last on the priority list.

Those of us on the funding side have to be honest about our role in fostering dysfunction—and our responsibility for, instead, promoting excellence.

Foundations and key donors bring their own agendas to organizations, forcing organizations to contend with conflicting and often contradictory demands that limit their effectiveness in an increasingly competitive environment.

Boards also need to step up. Too many board members identify their appointment to a Jewish board as a reward for their social and economic status, rather than as stewardship of a sacred communal asset. They treat membership casually, with attendance, punctuality, and preparation optional. What makes their behavior

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on Jewish organizational boards suboptimal, when they are, no doubt, behaving quite differently on the boards of major hospitals, public companies, and museums? Simply put, they see the Jewish community as an extension of their family life, not their corporate life. Dysfunction and misbehavior are more acceptable in a personal context than in a corporate one.

The “family” spirit might work for fundraising, but it has many downsides. Boards need to be serious and professional: They need governance and nominating chairs who are constantly seeking to upgrade their bylaws and operating rules; they need term limits and the fresh thinking that new members can bring; they need to hold directors accountable; and they need limits on the size of the board. Newer, smaller organizations need to strive for best practices as well. Social entrepreneurs often rely too closely on a founding “friends and family” board, which often offers little pushback to the entrepreneur’s vision and little actual governance. CEOs and board allies need to be in true partnership to build cultures that take board service seriously.

The sense of family also leads many leaders to pride themselves on “knowing” an organization’s market on a gut level, believing that every Jew is somehow just like them, rather than using actual research and data to drive decision-making. In truth, many boards

(and even C-suite leaders) look very little like the communities they are designed to serve: They are older, wealthier, more male, more conservative, and more embedded in traditional Jewish life and institutions. Thus, the assumption that leaders can simply “know” their constituents seems far-fetched. They would be better positioned to fulfill their purposes if they observed and listened to the diverse communities they serve.

Organizations also need to develop best-in-class staff cultures if they are going to thrive. A recent study of the highest-performing American nonprofit organizations delineated the elements that staff reported as being necessary to their resilience and success, including feeling valued by their employer, supported by their supervisors, having confidence in institutional leadership, believing that the organization values quality, and understanding the organization’s long-term strategy.

Do these conditions exist for staff in Jewish organizations? We barely know. The fact that we’ve only recently started asking is itself part of the problem. In 2014, recognizing that Jewish nonprofits needed to focus attention on the issue of “talent,” several major Jewish foundations and Federations created Leading Edge, the first national Jewish initiative dedicated to acquiring and retaining professional and volunteer talent for Jewish organizations. One of Leading Edge’s first priorities has been to understand Jewish organizational culture through annual Employee Experience Surveys, whose results it then aggregates and publishes. The last report, from 2019, was based on data from 11,400 employees (of approximately 73,000 in the field) from 182 organizations. Learning about employee satisfaction (or lack thereof) has real results: Organizations that take the survey repeatedly score better over time, and the more times an organization takes the survey, the better its scores. Data matter.

The mantra of organizational excellence is *focus, alignment, and intensity*. What does this look like in practice? See, for example, the organization in sixth place on the Nonprofit Top 50 Places to Work list, Musicians on Call (MoC), which delivers

in-person and virtual performances at the bedsides of patients in hospitals and health-care facilities. MoC embraces the connection between mission and performance. Quarterly board meetings utilize a dashboard that, while starting with financials, goes far beyond them to understand the quarter's performance. Every board member is accountable for committee work throughout the quarter, and board members who do not fulfill their range of responsibilities to the organization (including a \$50,000 give-or-get financial commitment) know that they won't be renominated. They understand that accountability and responsibility go hand in hand. Staff are energized by a demanding environment that boasts clarity of purpose and a near-daily set of metrics to chart their progress.



The pandemic has offered every organization a moment of opportunity to recalibrate. In so many ways, “the way we always do things” had to be changed overnight. The breathtaking emergency response—the rapid collaboration of Jewish foundations and of so many organizations, the conversion of Federation parking lots into food-distribution centers, the near-immediate development of online capabilities for program delivery—must now be followed by a period of organizational reimagination.

We now know that many organizations can change if they need to, and that others cannot. The opportunity in front of us is to follow up on what we've learned and to take the challenge of communal continuity seriously. We must avoid the pitfalls of Amtrak: We need to align our missions and visions, and hold our governance bodies, management, and staff accountable for measurable progress. Where serious change needs to happen—whether through restructuring, mergers, changes in leadership, or in programming—we need to have the courage and the creativity to embrace it.

Jewish history is full of stories of amazing resilience. New challenges and opportunities have led, over and over again, to radical

changes in Jewish communal life, driven by life-affirming Jewish values. This past should reassure us that change is possible yet again. The challenges of the current moment require us to embrace the double helix of vision, mission, and our human resources. Our memories will never exceed our dreams. We can—and we must—adapt. \*