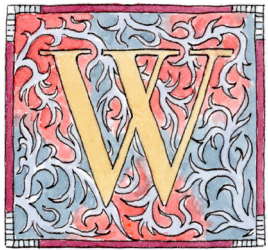


‘We’re All Just Waiting to Get Fired’



WORKING IN Jewish philanthropy affords me a 30,000-foot view of the communal landscape. I talk to a lot of people. Most are kind, generous, mission-driven Jewish communal professionals who have dedicated their careers to Jewish thriving. Many see their work on behalf of the Jew-

ish people as I do: as a privilege and a gift.

So it’s frightening to hear the way some of the leaders I’ve been talking with have been speaking lately. Cancel culture, incivility, and illiberalism are taking a toll. Unchecked, it will lead to the loss of talented leaders just when we need them the most.

Like anything worth doing, leading Jewish institutions is not easy. It involves fundraising, board-building, figuring out ways to deliver services more effectively, making Jewish organizations great and rewarding places to work, and holding together diverse, argumentative communities while making them warm, welcoming, and inclusive. Responding to the restrictions of Covid-19 multiplied the difficulties, even as it demonstrated the passion, love, and

commitment so many Jewish communal professionals have toward those they serve. As we emerge from restrictions, and institutions reopen and regroup, we’re faced with big questions about what the past couple of years have wrought and what we do next.

Given all of these challenges, how can we afford a culture that breeds stories like the ones below, all of which came from Jewish communal superstars—admired leaders of well-respected organizations, the recipients of millions of dollars of philanthropy and countless hours of leadership development and education?

- “We’re all just waiting to get fired,” one CEO said with a resigned shrug. The “we” in his sentence was, as he put it, the “normal” people in his organization and among his peers at other organizations. What they’re worried about is already happening: Employee and stakeholder complaints about behaviors, people, words, or policies they don’t like, complaints that quickly spiral out of control. Like the story that another leader told me of being accused by an employee of promulgating “white-supremacy culture” for reminding staff that they need to work regular hours—such language turns a normal work conflict into a radioactive encounter. (And it is unfortunately part of a broader assault on professionalism in the nonprofit sector that, if followed, will make it extremely difficult to run effective organizations.)
- “It’s impossible to lead right now,” another CEO told me, describing the demands from employees and core constituents that the organization issue public statements on the most controversial political issues of the moment, regardless of their divisiveness or relevance to the mission. Silence equals complicity, their argument goes, which also explains why employees at so many organizations are also constantly policing one another’s language and behavior, creating cultures where co-workers walk on eggshells rather than building

camaraderie. When the progressive magazine *The Intercept* published an exposé of the ways employees at many left-leaning organizations are derailing the missions of their organizations through accusations of racism, sexism, and the like, the article spread among Jewish social-justice leaders like wildfire. “It made me weep,” one of those leaders said to me. “I felt so seen.”

- Similarly: A passionately progressive CEO recounted with anguish a story of being falsely attacked as a racist in an online forum of Jewish professionals. She didn’t argue back; it felt to her like a losing battle at a time of willful misinterpretation, online cruelty, and performative virtue-signaling. “It’s hard to lead authentically when every mistake is magnified and ends up with you in the newspaper. You feel like a villain, even though you’re not. Every day, leaders are trying to be morally courageous, but that’s constantly threatened by public, external perception.”
- Attacks come from the Right as well, especially around the traditional fault line of Israel. “Cancellation isn’t new,” one long-time Hillel director told me. “In the early days you’d get *schmeissed* [killed] for being too liberal on Israel stuff. Right-leaning donors would send spies to infiltrate conferences and meetings.” Another leader who has worked in several national Jewish organizations agreed: “Israel is the key issue that causes professionals to self-censor. No one wants to be called a kapo.”
- Then there are the “threatening, nasty, and vicious parents” who are “going to make our professionals quit,” according to a leader in the Jewish summer-camp sector. “It’s not helicoptering any more, it’s bulldozing. They’ve lost a sense of commonality, of civility. They don’t trust anyone.” Anyone who has been part of a parents’ Facebook or WhatsApp group for their kids’ school

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or youth program knows precisely what he’s talking about: the magnification of minor grievances and inconveniences by small groups of vocal critics who seem incapable of grace or compassion for hard-working staff—or of believing that their kids can put up with mediocre food or an uncomfortable bed.

- And, finally (believe me, I could go on), there was the colleague leading a major organization who told me that this would be, he was sure, his last job in the Jewish communal world: No one would hire a middle-aged, straight, white guy, regardless of his experience or merit. While he—and I—want the doors of opportunity open to all, how is it in our collective best interest to replace the old discrimination with a new one, against people like him? (Why do we expect that the Jewish communal professional class will reflect communal demography anyway? Is anyone complaining that 69 percent of Jewish communal professionals are women? And how can we move forward productively on these issues when even discussing questions such as “how many Jews of color are there?” gets you branded as a racist?)

Losing any of these stellar professionals would be a tragedy. But lose them we will, and many others with them, unless Jewish leaders change course and overcome what journalist Emily Yoffe has

called the “personal timorousness and collective mercilessness” that dominate our age.

What we are living through today are the unintended consequences of good intentions. A pendulum has swung in the past few years, inspired by efforts to build inclusive institutions and communities, elevate new voices, and change our definitions of unacceptable behavior, discrimination, and unethical abuses of power. But in our desire to right old wrongs and fix imperfections both individual and structural, in our efforts to listen to victims who were long ignored, we let the pendulum swing too far. We’re now in the zone of grievance, hypersensitivity, self-silencing, pitilessness, and vilification.

It needs to stop. We have invested far too much time, energy, and money in individuals and institutions to continue to enable or ignore the forces making our professionals’ lives so difficult. They are destroying Jewish communal value, taking leaders’ minds off their critical work, and forcing their premature departures. It’s time to call bullshit on oversensitivity, on public cruelty, on failing to differentiate between serious and unserious issues, on allowing baseless allegations to ruin lives, and on feeling compelled to respond to every perceived injury. It’s time to go back to leading.



Giving in to cancel culture is not only un-American, it’s un-Jewish. It’s a dereliction of our duty as Jews and Jewish professionals to foster Jewish values, and it’s shirking, as Jamie Kirchick put it in the first issue of SAPIR, “our duty to be unimpressed”—to stand apart from the political and cultural and intellectual fads of the moment (especially the cruel ones). We don’t need the newfangled religions of our day—fundamentalisms of the Left and the Right that substitute narratives for truth, slogans for reason, bombast for deliberation. We already have a religion—Judaism—and we need its tenets very badly right now. Jewish stories, wisdom, and history offer a treasure trove of lessons on human complexity, fallibility,

diversity, debate, resilience, and the ability to repent. These must be our guideposts.

It’s time to reclaim a moral high ground for our leaders and our communal ecosystem. Rabbi Mike Uram of Pardes North America talks about the need to articulate a “muscular middle” to help “take back a more pragmatic discourse” from the loud voices at the extremes. Let me offer some ideas to get us started.

Remember that everyone is created in the image of God—endowed, as Rabbi Yitz Greenberg puts it, with uniqueness, equality, and infinite value. This foundational principle of Judaism requires standing up for not only accusers, but also the accused. It means refusing to conflate allegations with guilt, issue statements before the facts are in, punish without investigation, and forbid repentance and return.

Insist on due process. We should not only refrain from issuing public statements about matters we may know little to nothing about: We should also be issuing full-throated statements in support of due process and the “innocent until proven guilty” standard. Leaders should act with restraint rather than amp up anger and hysteria. News articles are often wrong, biased, or poorly sourced, and stories spread on social media are even more so. The Torah’s legal principles—the rule of law, due process, fair trials, equality under the law, and punishments that fit the crime—are the foundation of the Western legal system. We betray both Judaism and America when we issue condemnatory statements without evidence and believe allegations before they are proven.

Refuse to participate in online mobs. Knee-jerk likes and retweets, ill-considered comments, “hot takes,” self-righteousness and virtue-signaling: Even were we not a people too often on the receiving end of the mob, we would know that these behaviors are profoundly wrong. As we all now know, viciousness festers online, where it is divorced from the humanity of face-to-face communication, freed

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from the inconveniences of evidence and due process, fueled by the intoxication of publicity and virtue-signaling, and nurtured by a culture that glamorizes victimhood and powerlessness. Yet rabbis, Jewish educators, and Jewish communal leaders who should know (much) better still pile on, tossing around radioactive labels, rather than urging caution, patience, and grace. The internet in general and social media in particular have become the vascular system of the Jewish body politic through which the poisons of jealousy, oversensitivity, fame-seeking, and cruelty flow. We must refuse to participate in such behavior and stop giving credibility to those who do.

Keep our communal discourse open and embrace viewpoint diversity. As I wrote in the first issue of SAPIR, I learned about “resilient listening” on an Encounter trip to the West Bank. Encountering the Palestinian narrative first-hand—one that viewed history, current events, and cause-and-effect very differently than I do—taught me that I was capable of listening to opinions with which I disagreed, even those I considered repugnant and dangerous. We need a community that lives by this principle, that welcomes many views, that refuses to call words violence, that encourages openness and civil discourse. We need full-throated exhortations to replace judgment with curiosity, as feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan puts it. We need to be continually opening, and changing, our minds.

Embrace a mentality of service. When the Jewish Communal Service Association renamed itself the JPro Network in 2014, it did so to emphasize good things, such as the increased professionalism of the field and the power of being networked. Yet something was also lost. I studied at Wellesley College, whose motto, *Non Ministrari sed Ministrare*—not to be ministered unto but to minister—took me a while to understand. As a young feminist, I thought: Haven’t women done enough ministering? Shouldn’t someone be ministering to us? It wasn’t until I became a Jewish communal professional that I grasped what service meant. The work is not about *me*—it’s about the Jewish people. My work is *in service* to the Jewish people, past, present, and future. It’s not a job; it’s a calling, a purpose, a mission. We must care for ourselves and our employees. But we cannot forget the higher purpose.

This calls for leadership, which includes standing up for organizational needs and not caving to every employee’s demands. As Netflix’s new employee-culture guidelines say, employees might need to work on things they “perceive to be harmful.” If this is too hard, “Netflix may not be the best place for you.” In other words, you’re entitled to your view—but the company isn’t going to change to suit you. When it comes to the current ubiquitous challenge of bringing employees back in person, the same rule applies. If leaders determine that their institutions work best in person, they need to respond as the CEO of United Wholesale Mortgage did to employees who pushed back: “They can work from home, they just can’t work at our company from home. There’s no hard feelings. It just means they weren’t a great fit.” We need to put the excellent functioning of our institutions first.

Listen to activists—in their proper context. Activists and their organizations play an important role in the ecosystem, but they need to be recognized for what they are: one set of voices, often ideological, revolutionary, and even utopian. They rarely represent the majority, and they’re not always right. A CEO called me recently

seeking advice on creating a policy for vetting board members. One of his board members was in the middle of a mini scandal, and many people had recommended he seek the guidance of an activist organization. He did so, but they suggested policies he felt went far beyond what was necessary, and that his leadership would reject. My suggestion that he just hire a lawyer specializing in nonprofit governance to draft a policy took him by surprise: “Right — I totally forgot I could do that!” Being a leader means establishing and moving forward with a realistic, balanced approach that takes many stakeholders into account, regardless of external pressure.

Reject the narrative that our institutions are systemically broken. Calls to right particular wrongs and specific examples of truly bad behavior have morphed into a discourse that asserts that Jewish institutions are “unsafe” hotbeds of sexist, racist, homophobic, and ableist discrimination. This is ridiculous. Of course our institutions aren’t perfect, but neither are they horrific. Jewish communal organizations and the people who work in them tend to be pretty liberal, politically and culturally, reflecting the dispositions of most American Jews, and they’re animated by a desire to help people who are suffering. Such fervently good intentions can sometimes bleed into utopianism. “There’s just an expectation that things have to be perfect all the time,” a CEO told me. “But there’s no such thing as perfect moral clarity.” We’ve mistaken the aberrations for the whole, and we’ve made it impossible to celebrate our institutions and the people who lead them.

Reinforce messages of resilience. Our mission — sustaining the Jewish people, caring for the vulnerable, building thriving communities of meaning — requires a resilient, dedicated, engaged, and passionate communal workforce, not one that reifies a discourse of exhaustion. We should listen to and have compassion for the struggles professionals are experiencing. But we must also remind them that work carries responsibility. Institutions have needs, and they’re not

always compatible with those of employees. The Jewish people has needs, too: excellent, creative, and effective institutions. “Quiet quitting” — where employees, psychologically disengaged from their job, do the bare minimum — has no place in Jewish communal life. It is a betrayal of those the organization serves, the donors who fund its work, and the employers and fellow employees who trust and depend on their colleagues.



So many of the Jewish leaders I know speak with passion and deep emotion when they describe why they became Jewish communal professionals to begin with. “People are hungering for what we have — we get to wrestle with the mission of the Jewish people in the world, and to be in that debate,” one said to me. Another said: “It’s a privilege to be able to put your heart and soul into something that matters. I don’t think it’s so hard — sometimes the pay is lower, sometimes the behavior is worse. But if I were at a law firm, I’d have partners yelling at me, or I’d have to drop everything for a client or work all weekend long. There are tradeoffs everywhere, and I’d take the blessings of working on behalf of the Jewish people any day.”

The ways Jewish communal organizations and funders pulled together in response to the pandemic is a shining example of the best that Jewish communal professionals can do. We should be shouting it from the rooftops. Jews are, fundamentally, a culture and a civilization of resilience, adaptation, and flexibility. We have endless examples of this to bring to bear.

The Jewish people will go on. But it’s up to all of us to determine what that looks like. We have the power, the will, the strength, and the heart to infuse our communal institutions with honesty, authenticity, diversity of all kinds, respect, courage, excellence, and joy. So let’s just do it. *