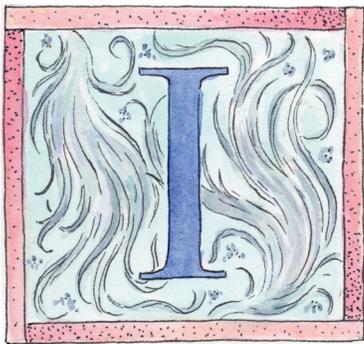


BARRY SHRAGE

Mission Over Money

*Reflections and awakenings after a career
in fundraising*



IT'S AMAZING how far a little bit of money can go.

When I was 22 years old, I received a \$2,800 scholarship from the National Jewish Welfare Board to attend social work school. A true child of the '60s, I had spent my college years chairing the CCNY College Young Democrats and protesting the Vietnam War, until the anti-war movement descended into extremism, anti-Americanism, acts of terrorism, and even murder. I decided to abandon activism and politics in favor of making the world a little better with individual acts of loving-kindness through a career in social work. The grant I received came with a condition: that I work at a Jewish Community Center after getting my degree.

That tiny scholarship changed my life. Working with teens at a JCC in Scarsdale, New York, I fell in love with the Jewish communal world, the Jewish people, and with the God of Israel — “the spirit hovering over the surface of the waters,” as Genesis 1:2 and my first-grade teacher taught me. I spent the next 55 years in Jewish communal service, a never-ending source of blessing for me.

The more time I spent in the Jewish organizational world, mostly in the Federation system, raising and allocating financial gifts like the one that had changed the course of my own life, the more I came to realize how little the Federation’s mission had to do with fundraising. This may sound paradoxical, but after 31 years as head of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies in Boston, I can tell you that the primary role of a Federation is to mobilize the community’s enormous human resources as well as its financial, intellectual, and political influence, in the service of the Jewish people and Jewish meaning. The job of a Federation leader is to be an organizational matchmaker for Jewish enterprise, bringing Jewish organizations and community members together in shared purpose and activity.

Money is, of course, one of the engines that drive our communal work forward. But money without mission is meaningless. The conversations I’d have with donors during “fundraising” meetings were substantive, and I’d nearly always wind up sending them a book afterward, following up on an idea, a person, or an episode from Jewish history that we’d been discussing. Such conversations were as much about raising Jewish consciousness as they were about raising Jewish funds; they were about the purpose and meaning of Jewish life, about the Jewish future and the identity of our children and grandchildren. Of course these conversations could also be highly motivating, generating the funds needed to make the dreams we discussed for the Jewish future come true.

But money is an easier metric to track than consciousness. For

decades, much of the Federation system measured success by how much money we raised, rather than starting by truly evaluating our greatest needs and then finding ways to support them. Our strategic thinking came to be determined by the goal of fundraising, subconsciously swapping out the monetary means of our mission for its end. We know the surefire paths to fundraising success: crisis, threat, survival, drama. While I'm not happy that the world keeps giving us these types of opportunities, I am grateful that donors generously respond to these calls. The Federation system has raised billions of dollars over a century to protect and save Jewish lives. But as my teacher Sidney Vincent, a revered Cleveland Federation leader, commented in the early eighties, "We focused on saving Jews and forgot about saving Judaism."

The aftermath of October 7 gives us a priceless opportunity to reevaluate our priorities. We are living through a hinge in history, a moment when the door to alternative futures is still open, the future is uncertain, and our actions can define our destiny. The great Brandeis historian Jonathan Sarna has observed that American Jewish history progresses in cycles; moments of crisis lead to Jewish "awakenings" marked by renewed interest in Jewish content and community. These awakenings emerge out of major, often tragic events that transform the basic assumptions of our lives. Needless to say, we are living through such an awakening today.



The Federation idea emerged in Boston in 1895 within the context of massive demographic change—the arrival in America of, eventually, around 2 million mostly impoverished Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Boston was among the East Coast cities that saw its Jewish population balloon. The model quickly spread to other major

Jewish communities, and then to smaller ones. Today there are 141 Federations across North America.

The origin story matters, because the founders of the Federations started with a need—to absorb, acculturate, and assimilate the wave of needy immigrants—and then mobilized resources to meet it. They created the structure of a communal system that has been the envy of other ethnic and religious communities in America.

For generations of American Jews, being involved with the local Federation was a form of Jewish communal belonging in tandem with the aspiration to assimilate. America offered everything: economic opportunity, freedom, the relative absence of antisemitism, security, and success. The Federations committed themselves to enshrining these features of American Jewish life as eternal.

But over time, it became increasingly clear that something was missing. By the late 1960s, many Jewish leaders and countercultural young people were starting to realize that Jewish continuity required pushing back against assimilation, not embracing it. (“Continuity requires content,” as Rabbi Daniel Gordis would put it many years later in these pages.) They turned to the Federations for help because, through careful planning and administration, Federations by this time had attracted effective leadership, influence, money, and power. But as organizations primarily focused on human services, they had little understanding or appreciation for Jewish education, identity, or spirituality, and were ill-equipped to cultivate them.

In a thundering and prophetic address at the 1965 General Assembly, the national gathering of the Federation system, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel opened with words of praise for the assembled leaders, then laid them out in lavender, urging them to move beyond the needs of the old paradigm to include the very different spiritual and intellectual needs of the new:

Our young people are disturbed at parents who are spiritually insolvent. They seek direction, affirmation; they reject complacency and empty generosity.

There is a waiting in many homes, in many hearts for guidance, instruction, illumination, a waiting, which is often intense, pressing, nationwide. So many are heartsick at the spiritual failure of our community...

...In this emergency we call upon the Federation: Help us!...

We must create a climate of elucidation, of pronouncing our people's waiting for meaning, by discovering and teaching the intellectual relevance of Judaism, by fostering reverence for learning and the learning of reverence...

We need a revolution in Jewish life.

Heschel foresaw an impending spiritual catastrophe and urged the Jewish community to change priorities. But it was The Six-Day War, a year and a half after Heschel's speech, that triggered a true paradigm shift from the era of assimilation to an era of identity and pride.

The twin shocks of existential peril and resounding victory had an exhilarating effect on global Jewry, especially in assimilationist America. The community developed a sense of empowerment, and with it came a craving for even greater belonging, for learning, and for ever-closer connections to Israel. Most important, it strengthened the beating heart of Jewish identity: Jewish pride, a revived feeling of identification with and affection for the Jewish people. A common sentiment among many in the wake of the war was "Until now I was never able to hold my head high as a Jew in America." It was a true Great Awakening, a transformation of the heart and the mind and the soul of American Jewry.

The awakening and the experimentation that followed triggered the beginning of a serious conversation in many communities high-

lighting the importance of Jewish day schools and serious “informal” Jewish education, especially Jewish camp and educational travel to Israel. In spite of all the conversations and some progress, the Federation system never achieved the hoped-for breakthroughs. They were unable to translate the sentiment into sustainable substance. Only Birthright, which was developed outside the Federation system, created a true breakthrough, bringing 850,000 young Jews to Israel. This had a well-researched and measurable impact on their identity and their connection to the Jewish people and the State of Israel, the essential prerequisites for any other change. Some Federations slowly shifted priorities, but 60 years after the first Great Awakening and Heschel’s speech at the General Assembly, Dan Senor would make nearly the same recommendations in his “State of World Jewry” speech at 92NY.

Why did so little change?

As Jonathan Woocher, the late great Brandeis sociologist, explained in his book on the post-’67 era, *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews*, the twin causes of strengthening Israel and saving vulnerable Jews absorbed most of the Federations’ energy. This undeniably produced inspiring results: freedom for Soviet Jews, the rescue of Ethiopian Jews, and political and financial support for Israel through too many wars and crises to count. These were causes that motivated Jews and enabled Federations to do what they were best at: relief and rescue, community organizing, and raising funds. They were less comfortable and less skilled at understanding the spiritual needs of the Jewish people and the danger of assimilation, or articulating the need for Jewish education. It was far more difficult to raise funds for Jewish education than for relief and rescue efforts. Rather than fostering Jewish spiritual and educational awakening, the awakening of this period was effectively survivalist and reverted to a sort of stealthy slumber.

But the lesson of Birthright was not only its bold aspiration to bring every Jew to Israel for free. The center of Birthright’s educational framework was *mifgash*, the encounter between young Diaspora Jews and their Israeli peers. The contrast of their life circumstances — the former as college students or young professionals and the latter engaging in life-threatening service to the Jewish people — was meant to heighten consciousness of Jewish peoplehood and inspire a greater engagement with it in everyday life. If Jewish communities in America had excelled at raising money for the protection of Jewish lives abroad, the encounter with on-the-ground protectors could inspire protection of Jewish souls all over the world. The next step in sacred survival ought to have been the survival of the sacred.



So here we are, waking up again. The horrors of October 7 and the subsequent worldwide resurgence of antisemitism have awakened the world’s two largest Jewish communities to the realization that they are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent.

The Federation system proved its necessity after October 7, raising nearly \$900 million to help Israel in its direst hour of need. In part, these numbers demonstrate that people need a simple and obvious place to donate in a crisis, one that they trust will allocate their money intelligently in a landscape they know little about.

But there’s more to it than that. As the American Jewish community has been through much fracturing and debate in recent years, its hunger for genuine leadership has grown. American Jews are yearning for vision, purpose, unity, opportunity, and hope. American Jews today know we face real danger. But we also face an unprecedented opportunity to lean into our Jewishness with pride, and to help Israel remain a prosperous and creative

nation, secure in its own land, while also leading an international renaissance of Jewish civilization, culture, learning, spirituality, and caring.

Federations need to help lead that awakening, as the Jewish communal system did for me over a half century ago. The Federation system and its robust operations are more than simply a proverbial *pushke*. They can be the muscle that generates the energy, and now is the time to apply its lessons from the past. We need to be stirring Jewish motivation in our communities and operating with a broader sense of Jewish mission. This was and is the core of Jewish philanthropy and communal service.

Let me offer some suggestions for the key discussions we need to be having around all of our many Federation leadership and allocations tables:

- We know that Jewish summer camp can have an extraordinary, lifelong impact on Jewish identity. Many American Jews already send their kids to overnight camp. What would it take for them to shift to choosing a Jewish camp?
- Many American Jews are already paying for private schools for their children. How might we make it significantly easier and more appealing for more of them to choose Jewish day school? Day schools consistently produce not only educated Jews, but the people who will become the next generation of communal leaders.
- How can Federations facilitate the creation of scholarship-granting organizations (SGOs) that will be eligible for financial support under the recently passed Educational Choice for Children Act. As Nathan Diament explains in strategic detail elsewhere in

this issue, the new legislation is a potential game changer for the affordability of Jewish day schools. The Jewish community must devote substantial resources and infrastructure to making the most of this unprecedented legislation.

- What would it take to expand opportunities for high-quality *adult* Jewish education? Given the outsize role it can play in motivating whole families to more engagement in Jewish education and communal life, it seems like a no-brainer for Jewish Federation attention and investment. If your last memory of Jewish education was your own reluctant attendance at middle-grade afternoon Hebrew school, you aren't likely to encourage your children to take Jewish learning seriously — nor will you be able to compellingly transmit a commitment to Jewish ideas, behaviors, and community. My experience in Boston demonstrates to me that a serious investment in high-quality adult education can transform entire families and a community — let's do that everywhere.
- How do we get many more people, Jews and non-Jews alike, to visit, volunteer, and study in Israel? How do we get more Israelis to visit Jewish communities in the United States? Beyond just one-off trips, how do we create more opportunities for *mifgash* (connection) between Israelis and American Jews, in both directions? There has never been a more important time for people to see what's happening in Israel for themselves, both to disprove the many libels now being spread about the country, and to experience the truly moving ways that Israelis of all backgrounds have come together to support one another in a time of crisis. Yes, Israelis are divided, but they're also developing countless efforts, large and small, to bridge divides, build commu-

nity, and help vulnerable and suffering Israelis. Israel today offers a model of heroism and resilience, loyalty and caring, courage and collective responsibility. Connecting to it will fill *more* American Jews' lives with meaning and purpose.

- How can we better understand and engage with the many new, grassroots efforts that have sprung up across the country since October 7? Jewish parents, civic activists, university alumni, authors and culture makers, lawyers, doctors, and more are banding together to fight antisemitism and build new Jewish communities. Most have little awareness of the work of Federations and other legacy organizations. We need to embrace them, understand the ways that our activities complement one another, and work alongside one another on behalf of our people.

In short: The demands of the moment, combined with the Federation system's renewed sense of confidence, must spill over into a willingness to innovate, to understand that we need to reorient toward investments in the fundamentals of Jewish life that foster a knowledgeable, connected, inspired community.

When Moses asked God's name at the burning bush, God responded: "I will be what I will be." Rabbi Jonathan Sacks interpreted God's answer to be as much about Moses as about God." I will be what I will be, but you will determine the outcome." Only through Moses's acceptance of responsibility to turn God's attention into salvation could the Jews be taken out of Egypt.

The world around us will be what it will be, and at least as I write this, there seems to be a good chance that it won't be a world that's very welcoming to Jews, particularly those who live in or love Israel. But working together, we Jews must find a way to determine the outcome for ourselves, for the good of our people. The Jewish

future depends not on the size of our bank accounts or our endowments, but on the content of our motivation and the strength of our relationships — with one another, with Israel and Israelis, and with the transcendent purpose that has sustained our people through millennia of challenges. Money alone cannot save us. Meaning, mission, and deepening our connections to our people might. *

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