The Future of Leadership

What should we believe about leadership? How can we effectively educate for leadership? How might we build collaborative leadership for our communities?

Welcome to the fall 2016 issue of Gleanings, released at a moment in time where the dial regarding the future of leadership in our Jewish institutions has been turned up to 11. At the time of drafting this introductory piece, Leading Edge has just released their report, “Leading Places to Work: Are Jewish Organizations Great Places to Work?” which shows evidence that our community has significant challenges in recruiting and retaining professional talent. Previous to this report, the Bridgespan Group, noting that over the next five years, 75 percent of the CEOs and EDs of our institutions will be retiring, raised questions about professional pipelines and succession plans to ensure strong, effective leadership for the future.
We’re focusing on three key questions:

1. What are the Jewish community’s current beliefs and practices about leadership? Which of these beliefs should we continue to follow and which should we challenge?

2. What are the most effective approaches to educate and prepare tomorrow’s leaders?

3. What might effective leadership look like in an era of collaboration and teams?

To stimulate conversation, we’ve invited respected community thinkers to address these issues.

- **Gali Cooks** of Leading Edge challenges our preconceived notions of the Jewish professional landscape and asks us to recalibrate our views on what leaders today need to know and be thinking about. We also examine ideas of adaptive leadership and design thinking in the piece by UpStart Bay Area’s **Maya Bernstein**; and **Dr. Walter Herzberg**, professor of Bible at JTS, shares insights that familiar Torah texts might offer us.

- **Mordy Walfish** of Repair the World examines the use of listening and text in training emerging leaders to engage in service and social justice. **Lyndall Miller** of the Jewish Early Childhood Education Leadership Institute examines the power of reflection and the potent impact of Communities of Practice to shape the field. **Justin Korda** of the ROI Community considers how the network approach to educating and inspiring leadership—by strengthening what he calls “weak ties”—has the potential not only to nurture leadership but also to bring all Jews together.

- **Rabbi Rebecca Sirbu** of Rabbis without Borders considers how dynamics of community engagement and team reliance strengthen one’s individual leadership potential, while **Dori Kirshner** of MATAN explores an individual’s impact in empowering a whole community.

We hope that this issue will help us realize that building effective leadership for our Jewish community is best achieved when we are in conversation with one another. This is why The Davidson School has formed the Leadership Commons, a space where folks from across our Jewish community can engage in training, learning, and dialogue around the issues that challenge our community. We hope this issue of Gleanings advances this important dialogue.

—Mark S. Young, managing director, the Leadership Commons
Paradigm Shifts: What Today’s Jewish Leaders Need to Know

GALI COOKS

Leaders matter. A great leader can turn around an organization, spark a movement, and inspire a revolution. Great leaders set a vision and empower others to join them on the journey. When an organization is in trouble or doing well, we look to the leader for clues as to why.

Midway into the second decade of the 21st century, Jewish educational and community leaders must understand and embrace a number of paradigm shifts that have changed our community, our workplaces, and our lives.

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<th>From 20th-Century Jewish Workplace Realities</th>
<th>To 21st-Century Jewish Workplace Realities</th>
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<td>Few wedge issues in the Jewish community</td>
<td>Many wedge issues in the Jewish community (Israel, intermarriage, etc.)</td>
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Perhaps the three shifts that are most critical for Jewish leaders to understand, appreciate, and embrace are the following:

1) Shift from the career ladder to the career lattice
2) Shift from single heroic leader to a leadership team
3) Shift from the Information Age to the Purpose Age

SHIFT FROM THE CAREER LADDER TO THE CAREER LATTICE

In 2011, the management consulting company Deloitte sounded the death knell of the corporate ladder.¹ The ladder structure is predicated on a set of assumptions in the workplace that no longer represents current reality:

- Traditional family structure (i.e., Dad goes to work while Mom stays at home)

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Steep organizational hierarchies

One-size-fits-all approach that assumes employees are more alike than different and want or need similar things to deliver results

The nature of the workplace and the worker has changed. The era of the company man starting a career at the bottom of an organization, working his way up the ladder for 30 years, and retiring with a pension is over. Organizations have evolved to become flatter, more fluid, and more flexible. Talent is more interested in a tour of duty, spending time in a meaningful role for a few years, than spending decades at one company. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average worker today stays at each of his/her jobs for approximately four years. As Sheryl Sandberg put it, “The career jungle gym is better than the career ladder.”

Jewish leaders who embrace this new reality and transform roles and structures within their organizations to adapt to it will thrive. Leaders can start by identifying where there might be room for growth for talented employees within the organization and then setting a course with individuals to ensure this growth. If there is not room for employee growth within the organization, then leaders can take the bold approach of supporting professional growth, maximizing their employees’ potential during their time in the organization, and then guiding them toward a better-suited role elsewhere.

SHIFT FROM SINGLE HEROIC LEADER TO A LEADERSHIP TEAM

Arguably the most lauded and analyzed biblical leader in our tradition, Moses required the partnership of his siblings, Aaron and Miriam, in order to successfully lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Each one of this trio brought different skills, strengths, and styles to his/her role. They were, perhaps, the original leadership team. And yet, Moses is the one who is interpreted as the single heroic leader, who, with God and against all odds, achieved incredible feats.

This concept of a single heroic leader has been the pervasive, yet flawed, wisdom that has existed in Jewish organizations for centuries. Yet this paradigm has shifted. We live in an increasingly complex world where a single person (or “atom”) cannot and should not be called upon to stand alone and shoulder the entire burden of adaptive challenges. Rather, what is needed is a leadership a team (a “molecule”) composed of different and symbiotic professional functions.

How this paradigm might translate is a senior leadership team that has a distributive approach, similar to the cofounder model in tech companies. In this approach, one cofounder may be the chief executive officer while the other is the chief technology officer. One example of this model at play in the Jewish community is Mechon Hadar, which has experienced tremendous growth and success in the last decade under the leadership of three cofounders.

Despite this evidence to the contrary, search committees of Jewish organizations often look for one superhero leader who will do everything for an organization—raise money, manage teams, recruit talent, build systems, set vision, inspire stakeholders, etc.—thinking that one leader can save an organization. Rarely do such people exist. No one person can be an ace in everything. What we need from leaders today are

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complementary strengths and skills to support and round out deficiencies. The fact that Moses’s brother, Aaron, acted as Moses’s voice since Moses had a stutter is a prime example of such complementarity.

SHIFT FROM THE INFORMATION AGE TO THE PURPOSE AGE

We are in the dawn of the Purpose Age. Each part of our world has gone through a radical transformation in the last few decades. We are now converging into a new set of processes to change the way society operates. Increasingly more people, and the Millennial generation in particular, are making decisions and taking action that bring them more purpose in their lives.

Millennials (born roughly between 1981 and 2000) are more likely to take a job for meaning than money. This is a win-win for Jewish organizations, which have meaning and purpose at the core of their cultures and daily work. The Jewish community is uniquely positioned to take advantage of this post-Information Age / Purpose Age.

To dig a bit deeper into these themes, consider the following question: Are the Jewish community’s challenges to adapt to these paradigm shifts that different from other industries?

While the Jewish community faces many challenges, we are not that different from other areas of society. Perhaps the most interesting parallel may be found in the analogy to an orchestra. Orchestras struggle with many of the same pain points as the Jewish community:

- The orchestra-going public is getting older. The vast majority of Millennials don’t have much of an appetite to attend concerts in orchestra halls. Might we find parallels here to synagogues, JCCs, or family-service organizations that find dwindling participation from the emerging adult generation of today?
- Orchestra halls are expensive to maintain, sucking up resources from the annual budget. Are our brick and mortar facilities hampering our ability to innovate and thrive?
- Orchestras are hamstrung by numerous unions that may make a change strategy difficult to realize. One might find a number of unions, as well as numerous committees, in many longstanding Jewish organizations that may stand in our way to adapt and evolve.
- Finally, in terms of talent, the majority of conductors are men who stay in their roles for long periods of time. Further, there is a “pay your dues” mentality for musicians who are rising through the ranks. There is a very similar gender and generational dynamic within Jewish organizations, which may no longer be a fit or sound strategy as we seek to attract the emerging talent of today.

Great leaders know that a thriving and vibrant Jewish community needs many different players to make a rich, harmonious sound. Like an orchestra, they appreciate that the whole, truly, is greater than the sum of its parts.

Leaders matter. Those leaders who can adapt to today’s realities of a career lattice, a leadership team, and an emerging Purpose Age are more likely to see their Jewish educational and organizational dreams

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7 Thirteen graphs that show the alarming gender inequality in US orchestras today: http://www.classicfm.com/discover/music/gender-inequality-american-orchestras/
8 In the 1970s there were blind auditions that led to some gender equity, but on a very small scale. How blind auditions help orchestras to eliminate gender bias: https://www.theguardian.com/women-in-leadership/2013/oct/14/blind-auditions-orchestras-gender-bias
come true. These leaders are more likely to achieve the symphony of strengthening, empowering, and emboldening the Jewish community to meet the challenges and opportunities of today and tomorrow.

**Gali Cooks** is the inaugural executive director of Leading Edge, an organization formed in 2014 by foundations and federations to influence, inspire, and enable dramatic change in attracting, developing, and retaining top talent for Jewish organizations. Gali's professional experience spans the public, private, and nonprofit sectors.

Her career began as a speechwriter at the Embassy of Israel and a legislative assistant at AIPAC. She then joined the Harold Grinspoon Foundation as founding director of the PJ Library. From 2007 to 2013, Gali was executive director of the Rita J. & Stanley H. Kaplan Family Foundation. In the private sector, Gali was vice president of Operations at an education technology startup. Most recently, Gali was director of Business Operations in the Youth Division of Union for Reform Judaism.

Gali serves on the boards of Keshet and the Joshua Venture Group, and holds a BA from the University of Wisconsin–Madison and an MBA from the NYU Stern School of Business.

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**Let’s “Verb” Leadership**

**MAYA BERNSTEIN**

Given the myriad of complex challenges and opportunities facing the Jewish community today, what actions are necessary, and who should take responsibility?

We often think of leadership as a role—the president is the leader of our nation; the team captain is the leader of the team; the CEO is the leader of the organization. What, though, if we were to think of leadership as a **verb**? What if we jettisoned the notion of “a leader” completely and instead approached leadership as an activity in which everyone could engage?

Adaptive Leadership theory, conceived and developed by Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky, posits that leadership is an activity with a clear purpose. Leadership, they argue, is the work necessary to bridge the gap between a group’s aspirations and its current reality. That means that the work of leadership involves being brutally honest about what is working and what is not. It means being creatively optimistic and clear-sighted about the group’s aspirations—where it strives to be—and sensitively bridging the gap separating the two realms. One’s position in an organization defines one’s role and the expectations that the system has of you in that role, but it has nothing to do with the work of leadership.

If we break down leadership into its three component parts, we end up with three core activities that compose the work: Observe, Interpret, and Intervene. It is my purpose here to inspire and challenge all of us to realize that the work of leadership is the responsibility of each and every individual, regardless of one’s authority or role in an organization, and that our community will be better and stronger if each of us engages in these activities on a more regular basis. Each of these three areas of leadership can be deeply informed by the Adaptive Leadership theory of change.

**OBSERVE**

The first phase of any leadership process must involve a sensitive observation of what currently exists, what existed in the past, and what is likely to exist in the future.
The present is deceptively simple to observe. Adaptive Leadership theory introduces the metaphor of moving between the “dance floor,” the realm of the action, in which you are one of the players, and the “balcony,” the realm of contemplation, in which you have the luxury of being removed from the action. You can cultivate opportunities to be on the balcony: for example, joining meetings as a “fly on the wall,” or observing a colleague’s classroom. But the real challenge is to be on the balcony while you are on the dance floor: to cultivate contemplation while in the realm of action. That ability to move between the dance floor and balcony is a critical leadership skill that profoundly enhances our powers of observation—the first necessary element in any leadership process.

The past and the future are as important to observe in any leadership process as the present. It is important to understand the history of any issue you might tackle: what things used to be like and why, what the original dream was of the organization, who was originally involved, and what their values were. The leadership work of observation must include conversations with those individuals who have institutional memory—who were part of the original design or founding team—and as much research into “the way it’s always been” as possible.

Finally, observation is not complete without an attempt to look into the future, and to engage in meaningful conversations about what is likely to be coming down the pike. The Institute for the Future in Palo Alto, California, has cultivated a wide variety of foresight tools to help organizations make more informed predictions of what technological, scientific, social, and cultural changes are likely to be arising in the next 50 years, and then to make organizational change and decisions based on those likely new patterns. One such tool is looking for “signals.” Are there hints out there in the world that might give us information about how our organizations and institutions might be affected? The work of leadership involves hunting for signals that might have an implication for our leadership challenge at hand.

INTERPRET

The second phase of leadership is interpretation. This phase requires looking at all of that which you have observed about the past, the present, and the likely future, followed by diagnosing the “gap,” in which you admit honestly where you are in relation to where you would like to be. One powerful interpretive tool is to learn to distinguish between technical and adaptive aspects of the gap. Technical aspects of the gap are ones which require the application of skills and knowledge. Let’s say your school wants to make better use of technology for the students’ learning. There are many complex technical aspects to this work that require technological solutions, including resources, tools, and training.

But there are also adaptive aspects of the gap. These have more to do with people’s values, ways of behaving and thinking, and their identities. If your goal was to bring technology into the classroom, to keep your learning environment current and relevant, the adaptive realm would be analyzing how the introduction of technology advances and impedes learning. It would involve looking at what would need to be lost in order to make progress. What aspects of the classroom would change, and what losses would those changes incur? How will various people in the larger educational realm in which you are operating react to this? When you invite technology into your schools, are there beloved people, programs, and events that will inevitably be excluded?

In the technical realm, you interpret the literal costs and benefits of making change versus maintaining the status quo; in the adaptive realm, you interpret the emotional costs and benefits. How will this affect our identity as an institution, and will we gain more than we lose?

Leadership’s second phase, this diagnostic phase, is perhaps the most important. This interpretive pause, in which those exerting leadership challenge everyone around them to look beyond the technical aspects of
the gap and to begin to address the adaptive aspects, is invaluable to creating lasting change.

**INTERVENE**

The stakes are often high when you are exerting leadership. You notice things that others don’t notice. You offer uncomfortable interpretations that challenge the way that people think and create discomfort. When we do this type of work, everything within us personally and around us systemically is yearning for resolution, clarity, and calm. Leadership work, though, involves staying in the fray.

That is why it can be extremely helpful to take a design approach to tackling a leadership challenge. Design Thinking, an approach to problem solving that evolved from product design, has been popularized in the past decade by the design firm IDEO and Institute for Design at Stanford d.school. It offers to leadership the concept of “prototyping,” or creating experimental interventions. The purpose of such interventions is to test whether or not your interpretations are on the right track. Interventions inspired by a Design Thinking approach can help you be more calm, creative, and willing to tackle complex adaptive challenges.

After careful observation and interpretation, intervention should be approached in two stages. First, imagine as many creative ideas as you can, without feeling the constraints of reality. Design Thinking offers multiple activities and tools to cultivate this skill and come up with new ways of approaching problems. Allow yourself to momentarily be suspended in this realm of imagination without the pressure of needing to make a decision. It is a finite phase, which transitions back into reality, but it is of utmost importance to dwell in that space of possibility. Next, embrace the concept of prototyping. Design a relatively low-risk, low-cost, rapid way to test if your idea is on the right track.

Your intervention should be focused on helping you get more data regarding whether or not your interpretation of the challenge is accurate. It can also help you gauge the readiness of the people around you to tackle the challenge. Creative, low-risk interventions can both help you make progress and give you insights that will inform your next steps.

Leadership work involves multiple iterations through this process. First, use the wisdom from Adaptive Leadership and Foresight methodologies to observe the current reality, the past that has defined it, and the future on its horizons. Next, interpret what you have observed. Finally, tap the creative and playful tools of Design Thinking to imagine a wide variety of possible solutions. Observe, Interpret, Intervene—then do it all over again.

It’s not only those with the most power or authority who should take care of our most pressing challenges. Let’s build our own muscles of observation and interpretation, and develop our willingness to take risks to intervene on behalf of what we all care deeply about, ensuring that our community continues to grow and thrive.

**Maya Bernstein** has facilitated inspiring and impactful leadership initiatives in nonprofit and educational settings for over 15 years. She draws on her expertise in adaptive leadership, design thinking, foresight methodologies, Jewish text study, improv tools, and storytelling to create unique environments in which participants become willing to take risks and experiment with new ways of thinking and behaving.

Maya is a cofounder and associate at **UpStart** Bay Area, which supports innovation in the Jewish community. In her work at UpStart, Maya helped launch a wide variety of cutting-edge nonprofits that are transforming the landscape of Jewish life in the United States, and consulted to established nonprofits, including the JCC Association, Jewish Federations of North America, foundations, schools, and synagogues on
innovation strategies. Maya is on faculty at the Wexner Foundation and Georgetown University’s Center for Transformational Leadership. She consults widely throughout the Jewish community and has recently begun teaching improv to middle-school students.

Maya publishes widely, online and in print, on the topic of innovation and change. She is a graduate of Columbia College and Harvard’s Graduate School of Education, and a 2012 recipient of the Covenant Foundation’s Pomegranate Prize. After a decade in Silicon Valley, Maya, her husband, and their children have recently relocated to New York City.

Modes of Leadership: Actions, Perceptions, and Calculations

WALTER HERZBERG

Styles of leadership are varied and subtle, offering different paradigms for our consideration. Careful readings of familiar biblical texts offer insights about leadership choice and invite us to consider the intentions of key players.

Genesis 37 provides a rich opportunity for reflecting on these issues. Jacob favors his son Joseph and gives him a special garment, setting Joseph apart from his brothers. To exacerbate matters, Joseph shares his dreams of grandeur that indicate that his brothers, and father and mother, will bow down to him one day. Soon thereafter, Jacob sends Joseph to check on the well-being of his brothers. When the brothers see Joseph approaching from a distance, they conspire to kill him, saying: “Let us slay him, and cast him into one of the pits, and we will say: An evil beast has devoured him; and [then] we shall see what will become of his dreams” (Gen. 37:20).

Then, in a mode of leadership that could be interpreted from many different angles, brother Reuven attempts to save Joseph:

Genesis 21: “And Reuven heard it, and [tried] to deliver him out of their hand; and he said: ‘We shall not take his life.’”

Genesis 22: “And Reuven said to them: ‘Don’t you shed blood; throw him into this pit that is in the wilderness, but lay no hand upon him’—that he might deliver him out of their hand, to restore him to his father.”

Notice: Reuven is speaking in both verses 21 and 22 with no intervening response on the part of his brothers. Nevertheless, the Torah repeats the introductory statement vayomer (he said) as he continues speaking.¹⁰ Let us explore in more depth.

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⁹ All boldface formatting in quotations has been added by writer for emphasis.

¹⁰ The NJPS translation actually addresses the problem by translating the second vayomer, not as “Reuven said,” but rather, “Reuven went on.”
IDENTIFYING THE TEXTUAL PROBLEM(S)

We have just noticed a common literary phenomenon in the Torah I call the vayomer/vayomer phenomenon\(^{11}\) where a character continues speaking while an additional and seemingly superfluous vayomer is inserted.\(^{12}\) Noticing the phenomenon is the first step. Understanding why it occurs is the next and more challenging issue. Both traditional Jewish commentators and contemporary translators/commentators are aware of this phenomenon, but do not agree about its function.\(^{13}\) We must also pay attention to the following ancillary textual questions that play an important role in the commentators’ various interpretations. Their attention to and interpretation of these textual details and anomalies form the bases of their interpretations:

1. In verse 21, attention to grammar piques our interest: Reuven speaks using the first person plural “we,” in “We shall not take his life,” while using the second person plural “you” in “Don’t you shed blood” in verse 22.

2. The first occurrence of vayomer (verse 22) stands alone with no object, simply “He said.” The second occurrence is followed by the indirect object: “Reuven said to them.”\(^{14}\)

Based on these examples, what leadership models are we learning from Reuven and what are the greatest takeaways in understanding leadership in Jewish education?

MODELS OF LEADERSHIP: SOLUTIONS TO THE TEXTUAL PROBLEM(S) THROUGH THE EYES OF COMMENTATORS

1. Netziv’s Reuven

Ha’amek Davar (Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, The Netziv, 1817–1893, Volozhin, Belarus) proposes the following scenario\(^{15}\) based on his attention to the textual details:

The verse [21] does not state “he said to them” as it does in the following verse—because at first Reuven spoke in a very loud voice, speaking to himself [as if to say], “There is absolutely no way we are going to take his life.”

And once the brothers realized they could not oppose Reuven’s feelings and opinion, he continued to speak to them softly [this time], and explained to them why he reacted so strongly.

For the Netziv, the vayomer/vayomer phenomenon indicates that a silent pause occurred between the two statements of Reuven. After Reuven’s forcefully spoken opposition (“We shall not take his life”) to the idea of killing Joseph, he waited for his words to take effect. And once the brothers realized they could not oppose Reuven, he calmly explained the rationale for his feelings.

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\(^{11}\) The term “iterated quotation formula” is used at times in academic literature.

\(^{12}\) Other examples of the phenomenon: Gen. 15:1–5; Gen. 16: 9–11; Exod. 1:15–16; Num. 32:1–5.

\(^{13}\) Among them, Ibn Ezra (12th century), Radak (12th/13th centuries), Abarbanel (15th/16th centuries), Alshikh (16th century), Or Hahayyim (18th century), Malbim (19th century), U. Cassuto (20th century), Nechama Leibowitz (20th century), Robert Alter (contemporary).

\(^{14}\) In other words the verses are not parallel: verse 22 states that Reuven spoke “to them,” while verse 21 simply states that “he spoke,” omitting “to them.” Note also that verse 21 mentions that “he spoke,” while verse 21 states “Reuven spoke.”

\(^{15}\) He often provides interpretations by filling in details that, in a sense, serve as stage directions. See his comment on Exod. 32:19, second entry.
2. Malbim’s Reuven

The Malbim (Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Weiser, 1809–1879, Russia) explicitly articulates our question: “The text states he said / he said to them; why two times?” Like the Netziv, Malbim interprets the silence of the text, yet his understanding of the silence is different from the Netziv’s. For him it’s the brothers’ lack of response to Reuven’s repeated attempts to convince them not to harm Joseph:

At first Reuven wanted to save Joseph completely, in a manner that the brothers would not even touch Joseph. That’s what vayatzileihu (he saved him) means—that he tried to save him completely.

But when the brothers did not listen, he said, “Let us not take his life”—at the very least don’t kill him; some other punishment would be sufficient.

But when they did not listen to this either, he said to them, “At the very least ‘Don’t spill blood’ because you can kill him indirectly by throwing him into this pit where he’ll die of hunger.” . . . The Torah, however, lets us know that Reuven’s true intent was to “save him from their hands.”

Although both the Netziv and the Malbim interpret the silent space between the two occurrences of “he said,” the nature of that space is very different. For the Netziv, the silence represents Reuven calmly waiting for his strongly worded warning to take effect. For the Malbim it represents the brothers ignoring Reuven’s attempts to convince them to allow Joseph to remain unharmed.

IMPLICATIONS OF THESE PERSPECTIVES

Proactive or Reactive Leadership

Based on these interpretations, different models of leadership emerge. The Netziv’s Reuven is portrayed as a strong leader that doesn’t tolerate dissent while insisting that the brothers not kill Joseph. The Malbim’s Reuven, on the other hand, is portrayed as weak, diminishing his demand each time the brothers do not respond. The Netziv’s Reuven is proactive; the Malbim’s Reuven is reactive. But that’s only at first glance.

Compromising/Negotiating

Upon a more deliberate examination, the Malbim’s Reuven appears to be the consummate diplomat, not despairing or resigning himself to failure, but rather persevering by continuing to negotiate. He also proposes a compromise solution: yes, throw Joseph in the pit, but don’t lay a hand upon him yourselves.

What is especially illuminating is how we may perceive the intentions of those in leadership positions. It is important for us to go beyond our initial responses. Note that the Torah portrays a situation, yet the commentators’ perceptions of Reuven’s motivations and intentions vary. Not only was Malbim’s understanding of Reuven’s motivations different from the Netziv’s, we offered two possible interpretations of Malbim’s explanation of Reuven’s intentions.

So, too, in real life situations we may perceive a leader’s intentions differently from our colleagues.

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16 Malbim prefaces his comments with a list of questions, thereby following in the footsteps of Abarbanel whom the Malbim considered among the greatest of the commentators.
3. Alshikh’s Reuven

Finally, let’s examine one more model of leadership based on the comment of the Alshikh (Moshe Alshikh, Torat Moshe, 1508–1593, Turkey, Safed), who presents a Reuven who does not respond impulsively in the moment. Alshikh’s Reuven rather carefully reviews the situation and considers his options before speaking to his brothers. Like the Netziv, he bases his interpretation on the movement from first person plural in verse 21 (“We should not kill him”) to second person plural in verse 22 (“Don’t you spill blood”), and the indirect object “to them,” which occurs in verse 22 after “he said” but not after “he said” in verse 21.

Now what did [Reuven] do so they would listen to his words? He pretended that he was one of them wishing to do him [Joseph] harm . . . That’s why he said “We shall not deal him a deadly blow,” as if to say I am with you, just that it wouldn’t be appropriate that we go so far as to kill him. But he didn’t really mean it, but rather [said it] so they wouldn’t think that he was doing it because of his love of Joseph.

Once they began to be appeased, he then revealed his [true] opinion and said: “Don’t you spill blood—meaning I never intended to spill blood, just you alone, and to you I am saying “Don’t do what you’re intending.” He, therefore, did not say, “We shall not spill blood.” And furthermore, my suggestion to throw him into the pit, [does] not [mean] that I am joining you, heaven forbid, but rather that you do it yourselves. And that’s why he said, “[You] throw him in the pit.”

And therefore, this verse, once again, states “Reuven said” even though Reuven is still speaking. And that’s also the reason for the superfluous “to them.” All because his [Reuven’s] first words were not his true intentions; while his true words [which were uttered] with all his heart were “don’t [you] spill blood,” which was [directed] “to them.”

IMPLICATIONS OF THIS PERSPECTIVE

As Reuven becomes attuned to the realities of the situation, the concept of mindful leadership is introduced.

According to the Alshikh, Reuven offers a model of leadership that is mindful of the emotional/psychological aspects of the situation at hand. While the brothers are caught up in the moments of anger and rage and impulsively planning to kill Joseph, Reuven is cognizant of the mob mentality at play. He is aware that in those moments of intense anger, he might not be able to convince the brothers to cease with their plan to kill Joseph, and might even fan the flames of anger, exacerbating the situation.17 The brothers might even turn on Reuven.

The Alshikh asks, “What does Reuven do so that the brothers might listen to him?” He pretends to be one of them by speaking in the first person plural saying, “We shouldn’t go so far as to kill him.” In other words, Reuven implies, “I’m with you. Just let’s not go so far as to kill him.” But once some time has elapsed and the brothers begin to calm down, Reuven tells the brothers how he really feels: “Don’t you spill blood. Don’t, for a moment think that I am joining you. Don’t you spill blood . . . throw him into this pit.” Reuven’s intent, of course, as the verse concludes was to have the brothers throw Joseph in the pit so he could return later and save Joseph.

17 As the Rabbis state in the Ethics of the Fathers: do not appease your friend at the height of his anger (Avot 4:18).
Listen Up: Teaching Leadership through Service

MORDY WALFISH

Every fall, Repair the World welcomes a new cohort of full-time fellows—young adults who commit to spending a year mobilizing their peers around service and social justice. Each year I am tasked with delivering the following seemingly paradoxical message to them:

_We are about to invest tremendous educational resources in you. We are training you, teaching you how to lead, facilitate, deepen relationships, and grow your identity. And yet, this experience is not about you. We expect that everything you learn, every resource we pour into you, will be used to catalyze and transform those around you._

As our name suggests, Repair the World seeks to engage the Jewish community in understanding and pursuing the Jewish mandate of _tikkun olam_ through meaningful volunteer experiences. We are acutely aware of the disparities across American communities. Many individuals and families, including members of the Jewish community, struggle with the impacts of poverty, hunger, education inequalities, racial injustices, and gentrification each day. Inspired by the concept of _b’zelem elohim_ (all people are created in the divine image), we know that working toward a repaired world means seeking justice and equity for everyone residing in our communities.

Unlike other leadership programs, where the measure of success is the extent to which a fellow _feels_ like a stronger and better leader, for us, success is measured by the extent to which a fellow is _able_ to harness the skills we teach them, successfully pass them along to their peers, and ultimately utilize them in service of_
repairing this broken world. In fact, fellows are tasked with activating others through listening. We take our guidance from the community we work with, and we attempt to do the difficult work of breaking down the barrier between server and served. This requires that we approach everything with a learning posture and deep humility, prioritizing the building of relationships.

It may appear that teaching service-leadership is a little countercultural and in many ways counterintuitive. It requires teaching a particular brand of humility—how to both value the self and the particular resources we each bring to the table, while at the same time fundamentally decentering the self, in service of the other. Service reminds us that our time and resources ultimately do not belong to us. Rather, we must be constantly redirected to improve our broken world. We see our ultimate task as training our fellows to be bridges between communities that are all too often disconnected.

So how do we achieve this seemingly paradoxical educational approach? As we see our fellows as exemplars of the next generation of Jewish leadership, what are our steps to educate and train them for this enormous responsibility?

We use a peer engagement model, with cohorts of full-time fellows living and serving together for a year. Fellows volunteer with local partners, engage in ongoing Jewish learning about a range of social justice issues, and learn to facilitate others’ learning under the guidance of local City Directors and educators. Fellows use their own volunteer service as the base from which to recruit and engage their peers in service that meets community needs. Fellows model what it means to be in service, while facilitating Jewish and issue-based education programs for their peers, empowering them to connect their desire to seek justice to their expression of Jewishness.

To do this work justly and effectively, we work in deep partnership with Jewish communal organizations and marginalized communities by developing trusted relationships through listening to each other and learning together, creating the shared commitments needed to pursue social justice work.

At its core, we aim to teach fellows how to listen and how to act in solidarity, all guided by our Jewish values. The value of listening is instilled throughout Jewish teaching. Among the 48 qualities for acquiring Torah listed in Pirkei Avot, some of the most vital ones are listening, not taking credit for oneself, lack of arrogance in learning, and learning in order to teach. In order to best meet the needs and priorities of our partners and the people they serve, we recognize the importance of sitting down to listen to their experiences, their goals, their challenges, and their values.

We’ve learned we must enter each conversation with humility, acknowledging that our lived experience, challenges, and priorities will not match theirs and that the knowledge they bring to the table is valuable to our own growth and mutual work. To be effective allies and lead effective service learning that inspires our participants to work toward change, we must also learn in order to share this knowledge and these stories.

We strive to teach our fellows that listening is about hearing and appreciating the other’s perspective, especially when what we hear may undercut how we see the world. It’s about interrogating ourselves and who we are, even when it’s tough and even when we discover ways in which, despite our best efforts and despite how we understand ourselves, we too may be contributing toward the injustice around us. Perhaps this is the most important form of listening.

We also grapple with Jewish text, examining texts that appear antithetical to these values and individuals not always thought of as social justice advocates. Rather than avoiding or ignoring these, or labeling them
as “irrelevant,” we choose to acknowledge and discuss them. We embrace the concept of elu v’elu (holding two truths together simultaneously), encouraging participants to consider multiple perspectives on an issue. Therefore our fellows challenge themselves and each other to dig deeper as they consider the implications of Jewish wisdom on modern-day issues of social justice and their emerging leadership work in local communities.

How do we foster such an approach? In addition to drawing from our tradition and its approach to listening, we also operate under the assumption of the Law of Correspondence. This means that the community we create internally, as an organization and as a team of fellows, will reflect and, we hope, drive the world we are trying to build externally: one that is open, diverse, and built on authentic, deep relationships that drive at social justice.

Listening is often thought of as a form of calm passivity. Our approach to teaching listening is precisely the opposite. Listening is active and it actualizes itself through action. In our work, we are driven by the fierce urgency of now. We listen best when we are working and acting alongside our community partners and developing and deepening relationships that strengthen our abilities to lead and serve others.

Mordy Walfish is vice president for programs at Repair the World. He launched and now runs Repair’s signature Communities Initiative and also oversees Repair’s work nationally to mobilize the Jewish community to volunteer. He joined Repair in 2012, following four years at NYU Wagner as the assistant director of the Berman Jewish Policy Archive. A native of Hamilton, Ontario, Mordy holds a BA in Contemporary Studies and German from the University of King’s College in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and an MA in Comparative Literature from Northwestern University. As a Wexner Graduate Fellow / Davidson Scholar, Mordy also completed an MPA in non-profit management from NYU. Mordy is the winner of the 2015 JPRO Network Young Professional Award and a Schusterman Fellow. He coauthored the 2012 study on compensation patterns in the Jewish community. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Building Leadership and the Field of Jewish Early Childhood Education from the Inside Out

LYNDALL MILLER

“The biggest challenge in Jewish life today is identifying and cultivating good leadership … Tap into your inspiration if you want to lead well.”
—Dr. Misha Galperin, Reimagining Leadership in Jewish Organizations (2012)

What inspires Jewish early childhood educators to become leaders today?

As the director of the Jewish Early Childhood Education Leadership Institute (JECELI), which is a partnership between JTS and Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR), I have the privilege of reading the applications of those who wish to be a part of our learning community. Candidates have made the following statements about what inspires them:
• “I enjoy learning. I am very excited by new ideas and stimulating discussions, especially about education. I love the idea of learning for my own personal growth.”

• “I have dedicated myself to being a lifelong learner in the world of Jewish education. I am excited to be able to share my passion for Jewish education and Jewish living with others who feel the same.”

• “I work daily in an environment steeped in Jewish values, customs, and traditions. Now, both in my personal and professional life, I am able to appreciate Judaism and continually learn and grow.”

Inspiration does not necessarily lead to leadership, however. It is the task of the Jewish Early Childhood Education Leadership Institute to turn inspirations into actions that, in turn, inspire others.

JECELI fellows explore their motivations and their values in a Jewish context, primarily through text study, seminars, and dialogue. Experts share knowledge about adult development, and each person explores his or her evolution as human beings, professionals, and Jewish educators. Other facilitators help advance leadership skills, including managing the many challenges that can stand in the way of personal, staff, and school transformations.

To bolster confidence and leadership acumen, each JECELI fellow also works with a mentor and in a mentor group. The mentoring process supports the fellows as they turn their self-knowledge and their motivations into real initiatives within their programs. Each fellow reports on what has happened as a result of their actions based on their inspired learning. Members learn a great deal from each other’s experiences.

In fact, the intensity of the self-examination, the relationships between members of mentor groups, and the shared efforts at changing schools create the alchemy that results in both community and the development of strong leadership.

Fellows reflect on their experiences with statements such as:

“This program has strengthened my confidence and capabilities as a Jewish leader. After my JECELI experience, I will have a community that provides insight, support, and encouragement. This is a program that has helped me look at myself through a professional and spiritual lens...[a] lens that has been enriched by providing deeper understanding and meaning to what I do each and every day.”

“My time with JECELI fellows, mentors, and instructors has expanded my professional world; deepened my leadership skills by broadening my understanding of ECE and adult learning practices; reconnected me to Jewish text, ritual, values, and the land of Israel; and provided me with the opportunity to reflect on my own practices.”

One outcome of JECELI has been the Communities of Practice, formed by each of the three successive cohorts, which have emerged from the participants’ own commitment to continue their professional learning and leadership growth together. With the support of the Paradigm Project, our alumni maintain reading groups, webinars, and retreats. Each cohort has developed a brit (covenant) expressed in Jewish language that many of these participants report that they did not know about before JECELI.

Therefore, JECELI’s structure of working “from the inside out” has the potential to change the paradigm for how Jewish early childhood educators work together to advance the field. It also demonstrates that the pursuit of effective leadership is an ongoing enterprise.
JECELI represents one model of educating for leadership. Through self-awareness, collaborating with others, and taking risks to transform our contexts, we can strengthen leadership and change the field. We are not just a group of professionals; we are a committed learning community. What developments might we inspire next in Jewish early childhood education?

Lyndall Miller, MEd, MAJEd, MSEd, is the director of the Jewish Early Childhood Education Leadership Institute (JECELI), a collaborative effort between The Jewish Theological Seminary and Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, in consultation with the Bank Street College of Education. JECELI is generously funded by the Jim Joseph Foundation.

Leadership and the Strength of Weak Ties

JUSTIN KORDA

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach taught that the Jewish people are like a Torah scroll. Just as one or two damaged letters will render an entire Torah scroll unusable, so too is the importance of each unique individual in forming the whole that is the Jewish people.

My perspective on leadership has been informed by my own Jewish upbringing. As a teenager I was deeply influenced and impacted by two, at the time, living Jewish leaders: the Lubavitcher Rebbe—Menachem Mendel Schneerson—and Carlebach. Vastly different in many ways, I would posit that they were remarkably similar in at least one respect: namely that these were two of the greatest advocates and promoters of bringing different Jews together into one space. They certainly took divergent positions on Jewish observance and politics, and may have had different motivations for their outreach, but one could argue that each has been widely recognized for their open doors and active engagement of all Jews.

Their leadership impacted Orthodox Jews and non-Orthodox alike, including myself, a student activist who grew up in a non-Orthodox home. Both of these leaders left the world in a five-month span in the summer and fall of 1994, and in the two decades since their passing, no single Jewish leader, in my opinion, has emerged to fill their shoes in promoting an engagement to all Jews as a cornerstone of their leadership.

This void is noticeable. Today, we find ourselves in a period of time when tension and disagreement in the Jewish community are on the rise and arguably creating more division. Connection to and support for the State of Israel among the Jewish community are no longer givens. Many communities embrace pluralism and inclusivity, but others are closing themselves off behind boundaries that they cannot, or will not, bend to accept non-traditional Jewish identities. When it comes to service and tikkun olam, communities are choosing to either look inward and help themselves or to look outward and ally with other communities who are struggling in ways that Jews remember all too well in our history.

The problem is not a failure to engage with the subject matter. Leaders today are broaching these difficult subjects, and many Jewish leaders have emerged as articulate advocates for various positions, eloquently connecting their causes and perspectives to Jewish texts and values. It is, however, a failure to acknowledge, respect, and engage with other perspectives. It is a failure to show respect for other views, even—especially—when they are not one’s own. To borrow a note from the Allman Brothers, we need more leaders to personify the adage “I respect your right to be wrong.” We need Jewish leaders to strengthen and
embrace all Jews as a prevailing value by modeling understanding of and empathy for other perspectives, despite fundamentally disagreeing with them. This, I believe, is the essence of *Kol Yisrael Areivim Zeh L’Zeh*.

In our age of unprecedented connectivity, we have ample opportunities to connect with people, learn about their perspectives, and allow their perspectives to shift our own—in theory. In practice, our connectivity has led to our comfort zones becoming even more comfortable, as we immerse ourselves—both online and off—with our friends whose posts often reflect our own thoughts and opinions. Rather than broaden our perspectives, many of our cutting-edge tools to stay connected have actually presented us with roomy echo chambers in which to incubate our preexisting notions.

But there is a way to avoid the echo chamber, to see strength in others with whom we have weak ties. A refreshing example of this was at the 10th ROI Summit in Jerusalem this summer. I had the privilege of witnessing unexpected connections form between people from notably different perspectives and backgrounds: Jews of color, those who are gay, those who are intermarried, Ultra-Orthodox Jews, secular Jews, right-wingers, left-wingers, those with unique abilities, and those with disabilities. I witnessed Jewish leadership in action as I observed the networking and the one-on-one Brain Dates. Nobody was trying to convince his/her peers that his/her particular perspective was absolute truth or why his/her way of life was more correct. They were all engaged in dialogue aimed at expanding their horizons and gaining a greater understanding of how their fellow young Jewish leaders see the world. Despite fundamental differences of opinion, there is still a tremendous amount that can be learned from one another. This is dialogue that makes us as leaders and community members stronger and more thoughtful.

This is one of the remarkable outcomes of the strategic network that is the ROI Community—a wide web of people from all fields under the sun, some of whom maintain close relationships, but many of whom are connected through what network theorists call “weak ties.” The name wouldn’t suggest it, but weak ties are extremely important: while our close friends tend to move in the same circles as we do and are privy to much of the same information as we are, our acquaintances know people that we do not and thus receive more unique information.

By maintaining connections with our “weaker ties,” we allow ourselves to be exposed to perspectives that are fundamentally different from our own, and we give ourselves the chance to grow and be stronger leaders. The interactions between participants at the ROI Summit demonstrated a thirst for this kind of perspective sharing among young Jewish leaders and provided a snapshot of what the Jewish world could look like if this attitude were adopted broadly. It was an image of a Jewish world not in complete agreement, but unified by a curiosity and a regard for differing opinions.

To ensure a strong and united Jewish community, a pipeline of charismatic leaders with articulate, compelling calls-to-action—even if deeply rooted in Jewish values—will not cut it. The type of leadership that will help guide us there will be that which extols the virtues of weak ties, encouraging Jews everywhere to step outside their comfort zones, hear new perspectives, acknowledge them, and respect those who keep them.

*Justin Korda* is the executive director of ROI Community and has been with ROI since its inception in 2005. Growing up in Montreal, Canada, he saw how young people can truly be instruments for change, thereby setting the stage for a life of Jewish activism. In 1999, he led the first Taglit-Birthright Israel trip from Canada. Justin went on to serve in a number of positions at the Canada-Israel Experience, where he was instrumental in implementing Taglit-Birthright Israel for the initial 5,000 Canadian participants. Justin holds an MBA from the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya and a BA in Political Science from McGill University.
A Powerful Leadership Network:  
An Examination of Rabbis Without Borders

RABBI REBECCA W. SIRBU

Leaders cannot lead alone. Without a community around them, they would have no one to lead, and no one to turn to for advice. The best leaders seek out places where they can be both challenged and nurtured in order to reach their highest potential. The Rabbis Without Borders Network is a case study that demonstrates how a rich, diverse, challenging, and safe place enables leaders to think, explore, and imagine together, and therefore become more confident, transformative, and relatable leaders.

Rabbis Without Borders (RWB) is a pluralistic network of 200 rabbis who begin their association by being selected to be part of a 20-person cohort. During the cohort year, the rabbis are exposed to a number of different ideas designed to stimulate their own creative thinking on how best to integrate Jewish wisdom with modern life. The cohort group is intentionally diverse, with a mix of ages, denominations, parts of the country, and areas of the rabbinate represented. In addition, the rabbis have many different individual political positions and varying relationships with God and Jewish tradition. As the cohort gets to know each other, a safe space is established. Everyone is encouraged to share his/her own views and ideas, since only by speaking and listening to one another can we learn from one another. Participants are expected to listen to the opinion of a colleague with whom they do not agree, and are taught through several exercises how to practice this listening technique.

One of the first things that happen in the group is that stereotypes and assumptions are broken down. The rabbis learn that there are right-wing conservative Republican Reform rabbis and left-wing liberal Democrat Orthodox rabbis. They learn that some liberal rabbis are stricter about what they see as within the bounds of Judaism than their more “traditional” counterparts. Once the rabbis are able to see each person in the room as an individual and not just a representative of a particular denomination or a position on the halakhic spectrum, they are more open to learning about that person and what is important to them. As the rabbis get to know each other, trust begins to build, which carries across the cohort year and into the network. The trust that is established between the rabbis allows everything else to grow. Significant time is used to build relationships in the initial cohort and in subsequent annual RWB retreats.

It is essential to emphasize the importance of this psychological shift in truly seeing the individual. Once this shift occurs, the rabbis learn how not to prejudge any individual, how to be open to hearing what the person is sharing, and how not to have a knee-jerk reaction. After experiencing this session, one rabbi shared how he went home to have a meeting with one of his most difficult congregants. In the past he often lost his composure with this person. However, the rabbi said, this time, he was able to take a step back and see this person in a different light. He understood that this person’s issues had nothing to do with him as the rabbi and everything to do with her own history. Instead of reacting negatively, he was able to listen to her in a new way and they made progress on a number of fronts. Another rabbi reported how in the past, she often had a knee-jerk “no” reaction when congregants asked her to consider new ideas, especially those she considered to be outside the bounds of Jewish law. After her RWB experience, she learned to pause and to truly listen to what was being proposed. She found herself much more open to new ideas. She has now experimented with several new programs and ritual experiences in her congregation, and is surprised how invigorated both she and the congregation are.
This openness allows tight bonds to be formed between the rabbis as well. After the initial cohort year, the rabbis join the larger RWB Network. Connections between rabbis in different cohorts are ongoing through online and alumni gatherings. Faculty from Clal, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, who oversee RWB, are available for ongoing coaching and advising, and often make connections between rabbis who are working in similar areas, either geographically or topically. Because the open, pluralist values of the group have already been well established, the rabbis feel comfortable sharing ideas and challenging each other to think outside the box. Two-thirds of the rabbis in the RWB Network report being in touch with other rabbis in the network at least once a month. Thirty percent of those rabbis communicate with each other once a week. This is a leadership network in action, a constant reverberation of connections among rabbis to stimulate creative thinking for each involved.

In addition to the safe, pluralist environment that is created, this network approach stimulates creativity by promoting the value of positivity and optimism. Barbara Frederickson, a positive psychologist, writes about the “broaden and build” theory of positive emotions in her book *Positivity*. Her research demonstrates what seems like common sense: When people feel positive they are more open to trying new ideas and creating new things. When people feel bad, they get stuck in a small space and fear change.

While many in the Jewish world bemoan shrinking synagogue attendance and other markers of traditional Jewish observance, rabbis in this network see possibility and promise. Reframing the conversation about Jewish life in a positive lens changes the paradigm of how Jewish thought conversations work. In the RWB Network, rabbis at any stage of their careers can reimagine how they teach, preach, and share Jewish wisdom with others. The overwhelming majority of rabbis from RWB report that the network has encouraged them to experiment with new ideas and programs and not to fear failure. Ninety-one percent of RWB Fellows have created new programs or approaches to programming in their synagogue/organization since participating; 81 percent report an increase in attendance at their services and programs because they have initiated new ideas.

Several rabbis have since founded their own communities or organizations as a result of RWB. One rabbi reported, “I never would have had the confidence to start my community without the support of the RWB Network. I know I can turn to my colleagues to ask questions, think through big ideas, and get support when I need it. The Clal faculty has been incredibly helpful advising me on visioning, community organizing, and fundraising.” Another shared, “In my own community, I always feel like I am going out on a limb. That is a scary place to be. Now, I feel like there are lots of people out there with me.” It takes courage to try out new ideas, to experiment with an age-old tradition, to reinterpret classic understandings of text. Very few people can do it alone. Having a space where they can share ideas without fear, where colleagues will take the time to comment, give honest feedback, and support them in their endeavors, has given them the opportunity to try new things.

To be clear, the positive energy that is infused throughout the RWB Network does not block out serious disagreements and challenges the rabbis have with each other. Several intense conversations have occurred around Israeli/Palestinian issues. Others have debated the pros and cons of intermarriage. Still others have grappled with the changing nature of sexual and gender identity playing out in our larger society. What sets this network apart is that these conversations happen in a way that everyone feels heard and respected. Using their improved listening skills, the rabbis acknowledge when they’ve heard the truth of another point of view even if they still don’t agree with the larger opinion. No one walks away from the table angry. Though the issues may not be resolved, everyone learns from the conversations and, in turn, is better equipped to have these conversations in an open manner with their communities and congregants. They are practicing and modeling pluralist dialogue within the network so that they can be stronger leaders, breaking through that which divides communities at home.
“It’s lonely at the top.” It is a cliché, but it holds true, especially for rabbis; whether they work in synagogues, schools, campuses, or hospitals, they can feel as if they are working alone. Major decisions about how to deal with sensitive situations, how to lead a community, or how to respond to an individual or communal crisis fall to them. Establishing leadership networks and finding a safe space to vision, think creatively, and innovate may be difficult, yet is essential for successful rabbinic work. Harnessing the power of a leadership network strengthens the leadership potential of each individual and will lead to a richer, more flourishing Jewish community as a whole.

Rabbi Rebecca W. Sirbu is the director of Rabbis Without Borders at Clal—the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. Named as one of the most innovative Jewish organizations in America by the Slingshot Guide, Rabbis Without Borders stimulates and supports creativity in religious life. Rabbi Sirbu was named one of the “Most Inspirational Rabbis in America” by the Forward. She is a speaker, writer, and prominent voice on social media on a variety of issues related to religion in America today. She is published in several books—I Am Here: The Untold Stories of Everyday People; Faithfully Feminist: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Women on Why They Stay, and The Sacred Calling: Forty Years of Women in the Rabbinate—and is a regular contributor to eJewish Philanthropy among other publications. She manages and writes for the Rabbis Without Borders blog on myjewishlearning.com. In addition, she consults with synagogues, organizations, and individuals on leadership development, building creative capacity, actualizing ideas, and working across religious and cultural borders. Prior to her work at Clal, she was the director of the Center for Jewish Life at JCC MetroWest in West Orange, New Jersey, and a chaplain at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. A Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Vassar College, she holds a master’s degree and ordination from The Jewish Theological Seminary. She tweets at @rabbirebecca and @rwbcclal.

Tumbling Toward Leadership

DORI FRUMIN KIRSHNER

Leadership can feel like a heavy word. Images of us and them may come to mind; we may think of Moses speaking to the people of Israel from the top of a mountain, a cantor chanting from the pulpit, or a school principal convening a staff meeting. There is, however, an inherent danger in this notion of us and them, or simply an image of one person at the top as the leader with no community responsibility other than to blindly follow. It implies a lack of symbiosis and a stagnation of roles. Might true leadership be just the opposite? I was thinking about this recently in perhaps an atypical environment for leadership development, a children’s gym.

As a parent, one of my most gratifying experiences is watching my children cultivate a new interest. Everything is brand new to them, and it fascinates me to see what catches their attention and why they pursue certain avenues and activities and avoid others. My son, Elias, decided to take up tumbling, so we found ourselves in a children’s gym where he and his peers could move through various physical activities. The children were allowed the opportunity to experiment in a safe space to experience both failure and success. Elias, at first afraid and unsure, observed his peers taking risks. He wasn’t alone. Though they worked as a group, as a community, each individual child’s experience was unique as he/she tested his/her own limits in a place where an adult was always present and where there were soft mats to break a fall. Elias realized that though he might feel like he was flying through space, he was ultimately tethered to something—and someone—who would provide the support he needed. I watched him morph from the follower who was hesitant and scared to the leader whom others watched. He then was in a position to foster his peers’ strength and bravery.
The leadership and support around my son inspired his own risk-taking, and then he began inspiring others. The community provided a safe space for others to become leaders and became an ongoing source for these leaders to support and learn from each other. Isn’t that the essence of leadership?

I bring this lens to my role as executive director of Matan, a non-profit organization that aims to make Jewish education accessible to all learners regardless of ability. I may be seen as a “leader” in Jewish special education and inclusion. However, our mission and philosophy is to empower others to lead. We aim to avoid the us/them mentality that is especially detrimental when we talk about disabilities. Indeed, our community is only complete when we recognize the gifts of every individual. Matan’s contribution is to create and nurture a community of empowered and passionate leaders willing to tumble.

Our Leadership Institutes and other national training opportunities ensure that those on the front lines of Jewish education are armed with the knowledge, skill-sets and resources required for systemic change in Jewish education programs nationwide vis-à-vis inclusion. Most significantly, we are nurturing advocates and leaders. For far too long, an “us/them” framework for Jewish inclusion efforts has rested on the shoulders of a few dedicated professionals and the parents of children with special needs. Through training and more importantly through building leadership while in a community, educators are able to think deeply about inclusion, gain confidence with their peers in how to make change, and translate that into success in their own institutions. All members of the Matan community can then see themselves as change agents, playing a crucial role in changing the fabric of Jewish life when it comes to the inclusion of individuals with special needs.

Are these new leaders and advocates now experts in the field of Jewish inclusion, special needs, and disabilities? More so than before perhaps, but the Matan community remains a place to discuss challenges and successes with colleagues from around the country. In fact, participants in Matan’s trainings report that the most powerful aspect is being able to learn from each other—not just the inclusion experts or internationally renowned speakers with whom we work, but their own colleagues. Community nurtures the leadership potential of each of its members, listening and learning as they evolve from inclusion followers to true inclusion leaders.

Through this balance of individual and community leadership, we empower educators to create a shared organizational vision for inclusion, to experiment and make it their own, and carve out their own path. We ask them to “tumble,” sometimes achieving success, other times wrestling with failure, but always having a soft mat, a tether to Matan, and their newfound network of colleagues from which to draw support.

Leadership is one’s ability to guide, inspire, and “move the needle,” while conveying both in deed and in word that it’s okay not to have all the answers. Leaders who are developed and nurtured through community are constantly nurtured, always making room for others to foster their skills and strengths, and thus are able to help make a difference on the most pressing issues and cause in our field. Care to tumble?

Dori Frumin Kirshner is the executive director of MATAN, which significantly impacts the field of Jewish special needs education by training current and future leaders in a multitude of settings. Prior to coming to Matan, Dori worked at the UJA-Federation of New York for seven years, in both planning and fundraising capacities. Dori began her professional career at the Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan as a bilingual educator (Hebrew and English). Dori holds an MA in Education from The Jewish Theological Seminary and a BA in Sociology and Judaic Studies from Emory University. Dori is a sought-after national speaker on the issue of Jewish inclusion and has published articles in such publications as the New York Jewish Week, eJewish Philanthropy, and Zeh Lezeh, a blog of the Ruderman Family Foundation.
Conclusion: Leadership Coda

Of the many intriguing threads woven throughout this issue of Gleanings, the most colorful and strongest are the threads of commitment and passion. These perspectives demonstrate the depth of caring about our missions and, more importantly, our drive to guide people to realize our vision. Each of our authors has asked us to set aside “traditional” notions of leadership, to think about teams and fostering networks of supporters. Each has reminded us to connect, even with our weaker links, so that we may facilitate meaningful change.

Ultimately, our most powerful tools are those of reflection, deep listening, and perspective—considering the views of others and bringing curious inquiry to our interactions rather than assuming intentions. We should not be surprised that the Torah examples cited underscore our contemporary reflections. I am heartened that our tradition reinforces the practice of creating strong networks so we can bring change to our own institutions and organizations that will impact the larger field. My lingering question is offered as a hope: Will we give ourselves the space to tumble and to learn together? For then, we will realize our potential to make a lasting difference.

—Dr. Ray Levi, director, Day School Leadership Training Institute

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