



A Federation Calling: Making the Old New and the New Holy

By Beth Cousens

Our memories – our brains – are funny things. They oversimplify. They label and categorize. They strive for sense, often when the world simply doesn't make much. Stephanie Coontz writes about the “nostalgia trap” as applied to the American family: “The actual complexity of our history... gets buried under the weight of an idealized image.” (The Way We Never Were, 1). Nostalgia is not just a longing for the past. It's a recreation of the world as it was and as it is into something we can understand.

So, too, with Jewish education. We imagine that there was once a linear path – preschool, day school or Hebrew/ Sunday school or Talmud Torah, youth group, Hillel, and then marriage and synagogue life and the start of the new journey of the children of the once-students. Our imaginations have glossed over those for whom that path held little meaning.

And yet, we do have what were once normative practices, Jewish educational rituals. The path in its entirety may be romanticized, but it is still true that there are legacy organizations and experiences in Jewish institutional life and certainly in Jewish educational life – organizations that once comprised the primary opportunities to learn about, explore, or celebrate Judaism and that have adeptly served the core of the community.

Federations' support for Jewish education and specifically for these legacy institutions expanded slowly after World War II and then quickly in the 1990s. Also in the 1990s opportunities to explore Judaism – and that typical path through Jewish learning – began to change. Through a convergence of American start-up culture, growth of private philanthropy, and Federations' and philanthropists' attachment of Jewish education to Jewish continuity, the Jewish educational landscape exploded. Jewish education moved into places outside of and in addition to the classroom, and expanded beyond childhood. Particularly in the context of a free market supported by independent philanthropists with significant resources, entrepreneurial educators could pursue their good ideas, launching all kinds of options. Diversity came to rule.

This shift from 'path' to 'choice' occurred simultaneously with a similar shift in the broader culture. Unbundling came to dominate consumer choice, where we no longer demand complementary services from singular institutions and businesses. We stopped working for the same institution over decades toward a gold watch. The ritual of participating in certain institutional experiences became weaker. And the entrepreneurial ethos became stronger.

But let's not romanticize this shift, either. An audience remains for core institutions and even for the traditional path of Jewish education. From a policy perspective, from a Federation perspective, core institutions are critical in supporting and strengthening the core of the community. (And, of course, the leadership of legacy organizations is working tirelessly to update our strategies and business practices, committed to reaching our missions in ways that work in the 21st century – though that's a different article.) Sociologically, a core anchors a community, setting a bar for commitment, connection, and observance: The stronger the core, the stronger the entire community. Moreover, Federations have an obligation to each family and household to help them engage as deeply as they'd like. Our legacy institutions play particular and deep roles that matter. Some individuals and families will only ever participate in communal Jewish life through these legacy institutions.

And yet, some will only ever participate in communal Jewish life outside of these legacy institutions, actively looking for the nontraditional, for the new, and some will dance between both systems. And so, to paraphrase Rabbi Michael Uram, a great challenge of 21st century Jewish life is that of supporting two simultaneous operating systems. We need to ensure that both systems – the legacy and the start-up – are strong. Even while we are supporting entrepreneurs to reimagine Jewish education, we also must help legacy organizations maximize their opportunities to live their missions in the world.

For Federations, this support can involve providing significant resources – financial and technical (building capacity) – to legacy and new institutions, seeing legacy grantmaking practices with new lenses, and bringing the new to legacy institutions. For example:

Federations, Foundations, or the two working together in about a dozen large communities across North America have comprehensive approaches to maximizing enrollment in their communities' day schools. This often involves supporting schools' efforts to expand their endowments, incentivizing enrollment by lowering tuition, creating joint marketing efforts that offer a unified school website and a school recruiter/ school choice specialist, convening school leadership to find collaborations that will strengthen teaching and learning and create efficiencies, and investing directly in a variety of resources (STEM, encounters with Israel) to strengthen teaching and learning. In total, the Federation system invests approximately \$90 million dollars annually in day schools, and Large Federations' support averages approximately \$4 million annually, per Federation.

Several Federations are investing deeply in synagogue leadership and growth, providing resources directly from Federation. As example, Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston's Leadership Development Institute has provided leadership education for

synagogue board members; The Jewish Federation of Northern New Jersey's Synagogue Leadership Initiative offers seminars to all synagogue leaders on a range of topics related to synagogue growth and health. In New York, SYNERGY has provided leading resources on critical topics in synagogue life, from reimagining membership structures to best practice CRM systems.

The vast majority of Federations support Hillels – where a small Federation doesn't have a Hillel, it often supports Hillel International. We estimate a total of approximately \$25 million allocated to the Hillel system annually across Federations.

Jewish Community Centers continue to receive foundational funding from Federations, \$50 million annually in undesignated allocations and additional tens of millions in designated funding for family engagement, preschool, day camp, and additional purposes (for Jewish education and engagement and also human service needs). Jewish Community Centers are implementing partners for new and traditional initiatives and experimental spaces themselves for managing two operating systems.

Federations' allocations processes were historically focused on a fixed set of institutions that were part of the process. To receive ongoing funds, agencies have held "beneficiary status" and engaged in certain understandings with Federation. But to support and respond to a new landscape, many Federations have shifted the rules or developed new grantmaking procedures outside of the traditional allocations process. "Innovation" grant cycles are open to any institution in the community, including start-ups and synagogues. In a few communities, beneficiary status has been eliminated, and all agencies and organizations, including synagogues, are possible partners. A strategic grantmaking lens lets Federations make grants toward a specific social purpose, working with anyone who can help to achieve that purpose, the legacy and the new.

Some Federations have made efforts to elevate entrepreneurs directly. At the time that Presentense merged with UpStart, Federations were partnering with Presentense to identify and cultivate the work of local entrepreneurs, recognizing, strengthening, and giving attention to their ideas and organizations. (The UpStart collaboration continues; see below.) Federations reach out to growing local organizations that answer critical needs, providing technical assistance and helping them become rooted and strong. Federations' interfaith work fits this description, at about \$1.5 million spent annually, often representing grants to small organizations or chapters of a national organization.

Finally, several Federations have brought new ways of thinking and working to legacy organizations, often directly from the start-up landscape. In Chicago's Jewish United Fund, Federation is working with UpStart to lead a process with synagogue schools to identify bottom-up strategies to address challenges. Federation professionals just participated in the annual Kenissa conference, learning from, with, and about communities of meaning. Leadership of legacy organizations are interested, of course, in the ideas developed by the start-up landscape. The operating systems aren't and actually don't need to be separate.

In talking about strengthening two operating systems, we haven't yet spoken about the content of those operating systems. And yet, this is where Federations can help the two speak to each other in the most palpable and meaningful ways. The start-up world in Jewish education, often represented in "engagement" rhetoric, elevates principles of experiential education – that education should be life-based, relational, and rooted in doing. And, it invokes principles of outreach, that Jewish education becomes accessible and that diverse options speak to many interests and perspectives. These five principles – life-based, relational, rooted in doing, accessible, and diverse – are principles that we have extrapolated from the engagement landscape and are emphasizing in Jewish education across all settings. And they aren't foreign, of course, to legacy organizations (or to Jewish education); this is a conversation to which many are contributing. When we all work together, legacy and new, we can identify how to learn from each other to update all of our work for the zeitgeist today.

Over a century ago, Rav Avraham Kook wrote, "The old shall be renewed, and the new shall be made holy." He was helping the burgeoning Jewish state to bring to life ancient agricultural laws (shmita, resting the land every seventh year). The members of the yishuv were exploring the relevance of a legacy, of their (our) traditional inheritance, trying to understand if it could work in their present day. So too, we are doing more than managing two separate systems. Our legacy institutions, including Federations, were created in a cultural moment that is radically different than the world in which we live today. We are all working to ensure that both legacy and start-up are firmly rooted in the present moment, and we are ensuring that all of our work is infused with our sacred Jewish tradition.

Our challenges in making Jewish communities strong are great today; we need all Jewish organizational stakeholders in the game, as capable as possible. There is no choice here, only opportunity to work and succeed together.

Beth Cousens is Associate Vice President, Jewish Education and Engagement, The Jewish Federations of North America.

Source: <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/a-federation-calling-making-the-old-new-and-the-new-holy/>