



A community approach to our Jewish future

Elevating communities requires education, investment, and partnership

By Elana G. Kahn and Rachel Stern

This moment in Jewish history demands powerful leadership. As we face the uncertainty of our post-COVID world, including shifting organizational structures and demographic changes, real leadership will require reflection, innovation, agility, and a powerful set of skills to lead through change.

How can we provide resources, cultivate knowledge, hone skills for innovation, and spark imagination to make our communities engaging, exciting, excellent, sustainable now and for the future?

The answer lies in three key principles:

- High-quality Jewish and leadership education is essential.
- We must invest in the people who lead and will lead our community.
- Elevating our communities requires a proactive and systemic community-based approach.

Our Jewish community has always considered education as a central value. It's at the heart of how we talk about ourselves. As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks said about making education a priority, "It is no exaggeration to say that [it exists] at the heart of the Jewish ability to survive catastrophe, negotiate change and flourish in difficult circumstances."

Too often, unfortunately, we have left the education of our professional leaders to chance. Many Jewish professionals enter their roles without formal training for their work and many do not receive any additional training once they are on the job. In

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fact, in Jewish professional life access to educational and professional development opportunities is uneven.

Most of the somewhat limited conference dollars go to top executives, who are often already the most trained members of the team. Like the top leaders, however, entry- and mid-level professionals are deeply committed to key community building, the specific missions of our organizations, and the enrichment of Jewish life. Jewish professionals work extraordinary hours, often devoting their personal lives to professional endeavors. As possible, they pick up learning along the way, but mostly they serve our communities by doing, doing, doing. They need the training and tools to advance their essential work and chart our future.

Psychologist and lecturer Dr. Betsy Stone recently focused a spotlight on the special crisis of communal professionals, noting the high rate of habitual burnout among them. The wellbeing of our community and its institutions depends on supporting those who serve us in communal roles. Learning nourishes our professionals. It provides them with the opportunity to enrich themselves, reflect on their professional practices, develop strong networks of colleague that together lift up our professionals and reenergizes their work.

Shalom Austin and Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership have discovered that special magic happens when a central community body, an educational institute, and a donor work together to create a synergistic, community-oriented, education-driven approach to communal leadership. And it's powerful.

A partnership with profound impact

The Austin-Spertus partnership was sparked by the persistent urging of a generous donor, offered to subsidize tuition for Austin Jewish professionals who enroll in Spertus Institute's Master of Arts in Jewish Professional Studies or Certificate in Jewish Leadership programs.

More than 40 local Jewish professionals participated in an initial learning session with Spertus faculty. Subsequently, four community professionals enrolled in the MAJPS program and one in the Certificate in Jewish Leadership. Others are considering beginning one of the programs next year. There is palpable excitement in the Austin community about this increased access to high quality Jewish professional learning.

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Spurred by the applicable learning and network of Jewish communal professionals that has emerged, Shalom Austin has begun convening local Jewish communal professionals for expanded and ongoing networking-building, learning, and professional development.

Austin has already noted profound impact in the community: One of the master's students shared with her team a powerful problem-solving lesson she had learned in one of the Spertus classes. Packing a powerful punch, the video made its way through the Shalom Austin staff, creating a shared language of how to recognize and approach challenges.

By offering these learning opportunities, Shalom Austin did more than act as a link to Spertus' program; it communicated to staff that their learning and growth is of central importance, that education is an inherent part of Jewish communal work, and that the organized Jewish community will support them.

What a powerful message to professional staff! They are building a community of learners, creating a shared language of leadership, and enjoying collegiality across departments and institutions. The psychological effects of feeling supported and valued will surely lead to better job performance and a higher chance of staff retention.

What we did was not hard. We simply linked arms – a generous local donor, a federation that prioritizes professional training and development, and an institute of higher Jewish education that aims to strengthen and invigorate Jewish community through applied Jewish learning.

The formula for this excellence clarified for us the following insights:

- Jewish professionals are eager to learn and grow in their positions.
- Funding professional development needs to come from multiple sources, including community donors, Jewish educational institutions, and the students themselves.
- Federations can create ripples throughout the community by communicating the priority of professional education and leadership, and then providing access.

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- Investing in education and professionals has the potential to lift the entire community

This is a powerful call to action: Invest in those who serve our communities by increasing access and demonstrating full-throated support for their professional growth. It would be amazing for others to follow Austin's lead. We can create partnerships to transform our communities through Jewish learning and leadership.

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