



Now More Than Ever We Must Speak the Language of Values

By Dr. Hal M. Lewis

Even a hardened veteran of communal crises cannot help but be impressed with the enormity of the response coming from Jewish nonprofit organizations over the past several weeks. Under enormous pressure, schools and synagogues, social service agencies, defense organizations, Federations, JCCs, Hillels, summer camps and so many more, have galvanized efforts to respond to COVID-19. And because these efforts only work when we let people know what we are doing, the North American Jewish communication apparatus is working overtime. From old fashioned phone trees to social media, from email to Zoom, the American Jewish community is doing what it does best, while letting people know how to access these offerings.

As a professor of leadership and executive coach, I have long been guided by Judaism's insistence that leadership is about behavior, not words or job titles. The *shoresh* (root) of the Hebrew word *manhig* (leader) is *nun-hey-gimmel* meaning behavior. The Coronavirus crisis is a daily reminder that how we *behave* in the face of this unprecedented challenge matters far more than what we say.

Yet in these very strange times I find myself re-evaluating the need to articulate why we do what we do. That is to say, while nothing is more important than our behaviors in times of crisis, real leadership must include infusing these deeds with deeper meaning by speaking the language of our values.

Whether we are an educational institution gearing up to finish the academic year remotely, a social service agency providing food and grants to newly laid off workers or a congregation hosting online *Shabbat* worship, our behaviors are not merely constituent services. They are living embodiments of our values and we should say as much. Hillels responding to the needs of confused and frightened students, senior facilities working hard to provide online connections between residents and their loved ones, adult learning centers, retraining their faculty to learn to teach remotely, are doing these things not merely because our stakeholders want them but because each of these behaviors reflects the values that undergird and inspire our work.

To be clear, it is not enough to invoke “values” as an ill-defined catchall term lacking in specificity or substance. Every behavior that marks our response to this crisis can and should be linked explicitly to the value concepts, sacred precepts and classical sources that animate our work. This need not require advanced degrees in Jewish Studies.

The learning that continues in each of our communities, unabated across the age continuum, is not merely a fulfillment of state educational requirements – it reflects our historic commitment to *talmud torah* in every generation. Remote worship services and weekly *divrei torah* are not merely benefits of congregational membership. These online *minyanim*, Zoom seders, and so much more are, in point of fact, manifestations of our dedication to *kehillah* (community), *p'nimiut* (spirituality) and the obligation we feel to live in accordance with the Jewish calendar.

When nonprofit executives and boards struggle to minimize the impact of this crisis on their personnel, they do so not merely as employers fighting to maintain a workforce but as Jews driven to uphold the laws of best labor practices and the highest principles of *menstschlikhkeit*. When our social service agencies appeal for volunteers even in an era of social distancing, they do so inspired by the *mitzvot* to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and an awareness that we are all created *b'tzelem elohim* (in the image of the divine).

When our development departments call their senior citizen donors, not for a gift, but to check on their mental and physical wellbeing, they do so not because their commitment to donor stewardship impels them to but because they are guided by the tradition of *kibud zekenim* (honoring our elders).

When our community relations agencies endeavor to provide the nonprofit community with the most up-to-date information on relevant federal legislation, while simultaneously remaining vigilant against the prospect of rising anti-Semitism, they do so not as bureaucrats or policy wonks but as communal leaders guided by the principles of *shtadlanut* (intercession and advocacy) and *areivut* (responsibility and interconnectedness). When Jewish federations mount emergency campaigns to respond to the seemingly endless array of needs, they do so not because ‘all they care about is your money’ but because the deeply rooted values of *tzedakah* and *g'milut hasadim* (acts of loving kindness) obligate them to do no less.

Leadership is, indeed, about behavior. And as a community we should be proud of the leadership we have shown and will continue to bring to this crisis. But we should think seriously about why we do what we do, as well. And we should couple our actions with an unapologetic articulation of the values that motivate and inspire them.

Our colleagues – those still employed and those facing economic uncertainty – need to know about the values that drive our efforts to protect them for as long as possible. Our board members, worried for their futures and ours, must appreciate that what we do is not merely a perfunctory performance of job responsibilities but something transcendent and holy, even if dressed in quotidian apparel. Our donors and grantors, motivated to do the right thing, need to know that we are bigger than our By-Laws or that which we fill out on a grant application. Invoking the language of values is not a marketing ploy or ill-timed sanctimony. It helps remind us that while deeply immersed in the trenches, our behaviors only make sense within a broader context. As values without action are vacuous, so behaviors without values can become mechanical and deracinated. Getting through the uncertain challenges that lie ahead requires a redoubling of our leadership behaviors and the willingness to contextualize our work within the values we cherish.

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