



## Breaking Through Together: Forging Strategic Partnerships and Alliances to Reimagine Jewish Community

By Aliza Mazor and Aaron Katler

As the current financial and health crises simultaneously shrink resources and shift priorities, organizations across the secular and Jewish world are asking whether forging ahead alone is feasible or sustainable. For the majority of us, it's not. Previously, the Jewish communal ecosystem was a marketplace of plenty – it could easily support multiple ventures and established organizations who worked in the same arenas and had similar approaches.

But in our “new normal,” resources will be more limited, causing organizations to eliminate redundancies while creating greater impact to survive. Those with challenged revenue models may need to make tough choices, including sudden or unplanned closures. For others, the crisis has revealed emerging needs they may not be equipped to meet on their own. A question that is likely top of mind for many is: *How can we have the greatest impact in the face of existential uncertainty?*

This array of challenges may seem daunting but there's a clear opportunity: strategic partnerships and alliances can play a critical role in navigating this game-changing moment, and will shape the Jewish ecosystem for years to come. In collaboration with La Piana Consulting, the leading authority on nonprofit collaboration and partnerships, UpStart is launching a [series of webinars](#) that will equip entrepreneurs, intrapreneurs, and other leaders with the collaborative tools and mindsets to engage in this valuable partnership work.

Strategic partnerships can serve as an effective lifeboat for organizations facing potential closures, making more efficient use of resources while ensuring the retention of critical programs and talent. At the same time, if a specific organization ultimately decides to close, partnerships are one way to keep intellectual property alive – whether it's curricula that have been honed over years, particular pedagogical practices, or program models. For those of us concerned about the potential decline of critical Jewish initiatives and ventures, strategic partnerships are one way of ensuring that the dividends of the last 20 years of investment in the innovation sector

don't come to an abrupt end. And, the flexible “geography” of the virtual world is opening up new collaboration opportunities, ones that didn't seem possible in our pre-COVID, local worldview.

Felicia Herman, Executive Director of the Natan Fund and Director of the Jewish Community Impact and Response Fund's (JCRIF) Aligned Grant Program, says, “Strategic partnerships and collaborations have never been more important – which is why we're seeing them emerge across the Jewish communal world, both within sectors and across sectors. We have immense challenges and opportunities in front of us. The wholesale shutdown of all of our institutions means that everyone needs to be thinking differently and linking arms with others who are doing their best in such difficult times. The more we can work together, the more an impact we'll be able to have.” (UpStart was a recipient of a JCRIF grant in support of this initiative.)

For organizations wrestling with how to pursue greater impact in this moment, partnerships are one way to leverage the unique assets of two or more organizations to better serve their constituents, rather than each trying to adopt and build new competencies or programs at a time of diminishing resources. Now, everyone should be taking a hard look at their work to see what others might be doing better, look inwards, and explore a partnership that creates more effectiveness and efficiency.

An excellent example of two complementary ventures finding common ground is the merger between Canfei Nesharim (UpStart Venture Alumni Network) and GrowTorah (UpStart Venture Accelerator Cohort 12). Canfei Nesharim, a global advocate for environmental stewardship since 2003, had developed a comprehensive set of Torah-based environmental curriculum for the Orthodox Jewish community. As Canfei Nesharim wanted to see their work happen on a larger scale, and GrowTorah utilized their curricular content, the idea for a merger symbiotically evolved. The merger helped to solidify GrowTorah's position in the community as leaders of Orthodox environmental work, rooted in science and inspired by *halacha*.

### **There's no one “answer” to the question of partnerships**

Through our [four-way merger in 2017](#), teaching win-win partnerships in our core curriculum, producing [The Collaboratory](#), a collaborative conference co-hosted by four organizations, and coaching numerous ventures as they explore alliances, we know what it takes to build long-lasting partnerships that elevate change and amplify impact.

What we've learned is that this work is not "one size fits all." We've experienced first-hand that collaboration is hard work but extremely worthwhile. Our community will need a range of alliances, from joint programming to consortiums to administrative alliances, all the way through to mergers, acquisitions, and consolidations. La Piana Consulting has an [excellent visual display](#) of the different types of alliances. We know that these partnerships often begin in small ways, such as the "[What We're Hearing From The Field](#)" emails and blog posts. These dispatches are an example of a new partnership across capacity-builders in the Jewish community (JPRO Network, Leading Edge, Boardified, UpStart, and Jewish Social Justice Roundtable).

To be clear, we're not advocating for consolidation above all else. There shouldn't be one of everything and we aren't advocating for a "survival of the fittest" approach. As huge proponents of entrepreneurship, we're not saying that the ecosystem is closed to new ventures or initiatives. We believe that we all have to do better in serving those who want new ways to find meaning and come together in Jewish life. Doing "better" means engaging in this work *together*.

As organizations embark on strategic and scenario planning processes, they need to have strategic partnerships and alliances at the front of these conversations. By building trust, creating relationships, and forming strategic partnerships and alliances, we create platforms for organizations to be in a stronger position to drive change holistically in the larger system, thus elevating their larger mission – not just a specific organization and its brand.

As we pursue this work as a community, it's critical that all of us – organizations and funders – consider the following:

- **In exploring potential partnerships, do an assessment of mutual benefits** and unique assets to make sure that both parties "win." Understand where each organization shines – like their particular approach or understanding of a target population – and how those elements can be combined to reach more people or improve outcomes.
- **Consider the power dynamics in partnerships**, particularly who has been shut out and marginalized from conversations. LGBTQIA+ Jews, people with disabilities, and Jews of Color have launched powerful initiatives and ventures around the work of diversity, equity, inclusion, and addressing the power dynamics and inequities that permeate our communal structures. Those same dynamics will play out at the negotiating table, in how partnerships are funded, and how trust is built. We must bring our attention to who has access to resources and funding to explore strategic partnerships, and how we might create a more equitable field to seed more conversations.

- **Combine forces in unexpected ways.** Established Jewish institutions are at risk of losing dynamic programming with reduced budgets. The innovation sector has a lot of creative, adaptable programming to offer, along with the team members to execute it – so consider a partnership that keeps the talent and the programming accessible to the community.
- **Leverage partnerships to drive field-building efforts.** Alliances and mergers are not just about stability and alignment. They're about organizations imagining the change they can create in their field and then forming an alliance to create greater impact. Consider what your field needs in order to reach its potential – and then find a partner you can collaborate with to drive that work forward.

\*We'll be sharing more insight like this in our [three-part webinar series](#), in partnership with numerous organizations\* across the Jewish community. This time of virtual connection is a chance to begin conversations and take small steps together in order to seed the game-changing collaborations we need to ensure the Jewish community of the future breaks through this moment with collective strength and greater impact.

*\*UpStart's current partners for this webinar series are: JPRO, Leading Edge, JCC Association, Atlanta Federation, Jewish Women's Foundation of Chicago, ROI Community. Co-Conveners will promote the webinars and host debrief conversations on the material for members of their network: Jewish Emergent Network, Jewish Community Federation and Endowment Fund (San Francisco), The Technical Assistance Collaborative, Jewish Federation of Los Angeles, Jewish Women's Foundation of New York, Jewish Funders Network, Natan Fund, Kenissa Network, and Boardified.*

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<https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/breaking-through-together-forging-strategic-partnerships-and-alliances-to-reimagine-jewish-community>