



# Where Do We Go From Here?

## Dimensions To Planning for the Jewish Future

By Steven Windmueller, Ph.D.

We are people who fully embrace its past but our track record in planning for, or at least thinking about, the future is at best uneven. Planning for the Jewish future is both structural and strategic; it involves policy questions and operational considerations. Last year, on these pages I prepared an essay focusing on the structural elements that defined the American Jewish experience.[1]

Each of these tactical issues must be seen on the one hand as distinctive and on the other as part of an integrative package essential for managing the Jewish future!

### **1. Searching for Leadership in All the Right (and Not so Right) Places:**

Possibly no issue is more important to a community then the quality and depth of its leadership. Communities are measured by the capacity and competence of its leadership cohort.

How will we define what attributes we consider essential and relevant for a 21st century leader? *What we do know is that our institutions will require transparent, adaptive, inclusive, and collaborative individuals. In this context a customer-centric oriented leader will be in order, where value-based decision-making shape outcomes.*

Clearly, we cannot “invent” leaders but we will most certainly need to identify and prepare individuals who exhibit extraordinary leadership capacity. The burden here falls to educators and rabbis, youth and community professionals, camp personnel and lay leaders among others in encouraging and nurturing such prospects! Bringing leaders into our communal positions and religious roles is not only about professional recruitment but also must be about identifying and preparing a new generation of laypersons.

Strengthening our existing communal Jewish training programs, expanding our board orientation initiatives, and establishing other avenues and points of entry into leadership development seminars ought to be among our most important priorities. The signature characteristic for this transformational era will be centered on the leadership question.

## **2. Learning Collaborative Play:**

As a community, we will need to adopt a different institutional paradigm. Historically, the 20th century Jewish communal model was constructed around the core ideas of competition, affiliation and membership. *In this timeframe, it will be necessary to acquire the tools and accept the cultural commitment associated with becoming collaborative organizational actors. In this current environment the modalities of participation and engagement must be understood as fluid and selective.*

## **3. Studying Who We Are and How We Are Configured: Jewish Mapping**

There needs to be a comprehensive review of the organized communal system. In our work published more than a year ago on the state of the Jewish community, Rabbi Hayim Herring and I called for such a mapping, when we concluded:[2]

*This new Jewish paradigm is one of instability and disequilibrium without a clear endpoint in sight.*

This new structural reality will drive the communal agenda and the new Jewish roadmap.

## **4. Rethinking Organizational Networks:**

In combination with a dedicated commitment to collaboration and a focus on Jewish mapping, a fundamental restructuring of the existing system of institutional alignments and relationships is in order. This reorganization will occur randomly or it can take place through a planned process. We will need to rethink the value propositions in connection with such instrumentalities as our denominational movements, umbrella communal structures, and national organizations. Can our community sustain all that we have created? *While we live in a culture of choice and personal options, the demographic realities and the financial burdens suggest a different operational model.*

## 5. Identifying What is Working, and What is Not, and Why:

"How are we doing?" A candid review of what constitutes "success" will be a necessary part of the new communal mantra. What measures should be incorporated to evaluate the elements that define or promote impact and achievable outcomes?

- *What does "success" mean in 21st century Jewish communal parlance?*
- *Who is successful, and why, in reaching new Jewish constituencies and in retaining existing communal members?*
- *What are audiences taking away from different types of Jewish religious and communal encounters?*

What are the questions that Jews are asking? How and where are they securing answers to these inquiries in connection with their life-styles, belief systems, and communal expectations? If we want a richer understanding of what concerns contemporary Jewry and where they are finding answers, then this is where we must begin!

## 6. Experimenting with Nearly "Everything":

*We are experiencing a significant demographic, cultural and social revolution that will lead to a fundamental transformation of the American Jewish communal system. Elsewhere I have had occasion to write about these trends and their implications for the Jewish future.[3]*

The creativity found within the nonprofit sector in general and the Jewish communal system in particular ought to remind us that there are many groups and individuals already tackling some of the complex issues before us, whether in connection with serving, educating, programming or planning for different constituencies and audiences.

*A different communal mindset centered on a culture of experimentation ought to define the next decade.* Little remains sacred or fixed within our communal structure or the core functions that define our current operational model.

## 7. Focusing on Trends, Opportunities and Threats

*Forecasting what lies ahead!* As a people we have been woefully deficient in monitoring predictors that can or will have an impact on the security and well being of

our community. While we are firmly committed to knowing who we are, as reflected in the vast repositories of demographic data, we appear far less prepared to address the futuristic questions in connection with our well-being. What trends ought we to be studying? Who else within the religious and nonprofit sector are currently analyzing social trends, communal patterns of affiliation, participation, and fundraising? My earlier articles pay specific attention to some of these core trends.[4]

- *Building Infrastructure*: Despite our expansive Jewish presence, what are the missing components? How might we best use or redeploy our significant and underused Jewish inventory of buildings and camps and retool personnel to serve the changing Jewish landscape?
- *Redefining "Jewish"*: So what does it mean "to be Jewish" in a 21st century American context?
- *Understanding Change*: By every measure, demographically, culturally, politically we are a different constituency than we were even 25 years ago. In some measure, we are today *multiple Jewish communities, distinctive and defined by different values, viewpoints and visions.*

How we receive, interpret and share information is reflective of the scope and depth of the changes we are experiencing. The communications revolution is but one expression of this new scenario of who we are becoming and how we will be able to operate in this virtual culture.

## **8. Using Analytics and Other Such Tracking:**

In planning for the future communal organizations will need to embrace analytics. Just as businesses and other institutions are introducing such devices as Sizemek, psychographics, when measuring social trends and consumer preferences, the Jewish community will need to explore how best to employ such analytical tools as part of its portfolio.

## **9. Understanding Confidentiality and Privacy:**

Few issues introduced here are as personal, yet as critical to the welfare of our constituencies. Today, individuals are particularly sensitive to and aware of the issues of security and the need to protect one's identity. At a time when many are facing the threat of identity-theft and growing concerns over privacy, the Jewish community must be particularly attuned to and responsive to these emerging concerns.

*Increasingly, whether as citizens, consumers or customers how institutions handle confidential information maybe the new measure by which organizations will be embraced or rejected.*

**Summary:**

In this moment in time we will need to rewire the communal enterprise. 21st century Jews are asking both new and old questions, while demonstrating their distinctive passions and behaviors in ways that differentiate them from prior generations. Organizational cultures will need to reflect these changing landscapes, just as our new leaders must be responsive to the expectations and messages of those who are on their respective Jewish journeys.

[1] <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/getting-into-the-mind-of-a-jewish-structuralist-insights-into-21st-century-jewish-communal-practice/>

[2] <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/rosh-hashanah-5778-challenging-ourselves-and-the-jewish-communal-system/>

[3] <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/the-world-of-the-synagogue-and-the-second-american-jewish-revolution-some-reflections/>

[4] <https://jewishjournal.com/columnist/237358/new-american-jew/>

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