



Now More Than Ever: Why Support Institutions of Jewish Learning and Leadership During a Pandemic?

By Carl Chudnofsky and Rosa Kramer Franck

Jewish leadership and learning doesn't stop in a pandemic. In fact, we need it more.

During challenging times like these, Jewish leaders and educators must support and nourish the communities they serve; they must lead and respond in a way that is dynamic and relatable to a diverse and hurting population; they must adeptly impart the wisdom found in our sacred teachings, the lessons of the ancient sages, to their communities, even while on shifting sands themselves.

This year, during COVID-19, like many of us, our Jewish leaders and teachers have been called upon and tested as never before in their careers, and have responded by utilizing their resources and training, rooted in thousands of years of ancient Jewish text, in the wisdom of the sages. And Jewish nonprofits like ours have been here to guide and support them in this work, while helping to prepare other leaders of the future.

"There is a sense when everything starts to fall apart and break, the spiritual skillset of being able to hold people and care for them and mediate Torah becomes the most important skill set," says Rabbi Avi Killip, Vice President of Strategy and Programs at [Hadar](#) and an alumnus of [Hebrew College](#). "People's souls are thirsty for meaning and for deep engagement. We have seen more than ever this year, and rabbis and clergy have been there, engaged and energized and doing more work than ever, to try to answer that call and meet that demand. "

"The buzzword of this time is resilience, where do people find inner strength and connection and grounding in their lives," adds Rabbi Ari Lev Fornari of Philadelphia's [Kol Tzedek](#), a Hebrew College alumnus and a faculty member at [SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva](#). "As we're living through such uncertain times, it is meaningful to connect to texts that are thousands of years old and that were themselves written and born of struggle and similarly uncertain times."

When the world changed last spring, faculty, students, and alumni of Hebrew College found that resilience – writing “Torah for the Moment,” creating music and art filled with spirituality and support, and volunteering at hospitals and on [Combined Jewish Philanthropy](#)'s “warm line.” Rabbinical students launched an online *Niggunim* Seminar and teens stepped up to serve the community through a new [Boston COVID-19 Youth Commission](#).

Hebrew College also partnered with Interfaith Youth Core to offer 18-weeks of spiritual nourishment through the digital [PsalmSeason project](#) and co-sponsored an online memorial called “[A Time to Mourn: Grieving Together In the Time of COVID](#)” to remember those lost during the COVID pandemic. And Hebrew College is not alone in pivoting its offerings in responding to the pandemic.

Rabbi Killip says Hadar has added a morning class on the *Amidah* – which they “would never have thought to try” before the Pandemic – and 80 to 100 people now join daily, as well as a Kid's *Mishna* Club – “something we had always wanted to try, but COVID gave us the push.” The latter has grown into a new Hadar Children and Families Division.

“The institutions that have pivoted with strength are institutions that have also adapted their learning structures for the online mode,” says Rabbi Fornari. “SVARA has a 30-minute *Mishnah* Collective and Kol Tzedek has 30 minutes of daily study on the *Amidah*. People are punctuating their day the way they would have with morning or afternoon prayer, but with learning – which is easier to do with one voice at a time. This has been an important innovation of the pandemic. Learning is really nourishing, intimate, and heart-opening. And being part of a learning community that has access to ancient wisdom in a time that feels so uncertain is grounding.”

“We could have 20 people in our studio on a Wednesday morning, but now people all over the country are able to access the experience, to come together and build community through Torah, across denominational boundaries, geographic boundaries, people who never would have met each other before,” adds Rabbi Adina Allen, a Hebrew College alumna and co-founder and creative director of [Jewish Studio Project](#). “We’re connecting through the screen but we’re also connecting through Torah, through this well of wisdom and creativity that we’re all dipping into, just like how we can all look at the same moon. At this time of so much loss and grief, Jewish tradition and Jewish text and the process of learning are helping us feel connected, and helping us navigate uncertainty.”

As we approach the end of this unprecedented pandemic year, as we do every year, institutions of Jewish leadership and learning desperately need support. But why, when

there are so many amazing causes and Jewish philanthropic organizations and institutions to support with your year-end charitable donations, should you support an institution that innovated during the pandemic? Why are we personally so passionate about supporting Jewish learning and leadership, and so busy this month reaching out to supporters to impart the impact their [charitable gifts](#) have on creating a vibrant Jewish community?

Fundraising for Jewish institutions is special because “there’s God in it,” says Nancy Kaplan Belsky, a co-chair of Hebrew College’s capital campaign. When donors support Jewish learning, they’re “in relationship with God.” Hebrew College Rabbinical School student Dena Glasgow adds: “We cannot let the pandemic strip away what is most precious to us. We need to nurture leaders and communities to affect change that will not just sustain, but grow, the Jewish community in the decades to come.”

Rabbi Allen of [Jewish Studio Project](#), says because there is no one definitive way that a text is understood or translated, Jewish learning in community gives people opportunities to understand new and different perspectives, to navigate uncertainty, and to prepare for the possibility of the future.

“This is a time of so much loss and grief for sure, but it is also an incredibly fertile time of possibility, where we’re pulled back from our normal activities, new leadership is coming, we’re going to come out from the pandemic and decide how to live our lives,” she says. “Our intention in Torah study is not just learning, but activating the prophetic imagination of the individual who is learning. We need each person’s creativity and ingenuity as part of this project of revisioning what this world, what our society, looks like. Jewish learning, Jewish community is a way to inform that, to spark that, to hold that, and to connect us to one another and to make our work feel sacred and necessary.”

Carl Chudnofsky is a graduate of and a member of the Board of Trustees at Hebrew College in Newton, MA, where Rosa Kramer Franck is the Director of Development.

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