



Embracing Complexity as Leaders

How many of us remember the mantra “Keep it simple, stupid” or the call to “simplify” complex tasks or issues? Well, now may be the time to revisit the urge to avoid complexity and rather to embrace it as leaders in our Jewish community.

All around us we find magical thinking, attempts to find simple answers to the complexities of the world. “Embracing complexity,” Andrés Spokoiny declares, is hard. But ignoring complexity will end in either irrelevance or catastrophe.

In his magnificent address to the Jewish Funder’s Network in 2018 Spokoiny suggests five ways to embrace complexity better, within a Jewish context.

1. First, **accept the diversity of the Jewish People.** Forget the idea that Orthodox Jews will triumph, that Liberal Jews will triumph, that Israel will triumph, that the diaspora will triumph. All *together* are part of the diversity of the Jewish people. If anything, Spokoiny suggests, we are “like a diamond, which is more valuable the more facets it has.”
2. Second, he says, “**become relentless question askers.**” To be a truly strong leader in these complex times requires the ability to ask questions, tough questions, questions that challenge the status quo and force us to look at things in a different way. Isidor Rabi, that Nobel Prize-winning Physicist, recalled late in life that “Every other Jewish mother in Brooklyn would ask her child after school: So? Did you learn anything today? But not my mother. “Izzy,” she would say, “did you ask a good question today?” That difference — asking good questions — is what creative leadership is all about.
3. Third, Spokoiny continues, **complexity demands collaboration.** Indeed, he insists “collaboration, partnership and networking are basic necessities in facing difficult problems.” We need to put our brains together to achieve solutions that work. Perhaps that is why the ancient Sanhedrin in Jerusalem required 70 members; not just one.

4. Fourth, **commit for the long haul**. “Any program that has made a real difference,” Spokoiny properly notices, “is a program that was supported for a long, long time.” Think the Zionist Movement, or the Soviet Jewry Movement, or Birthright. No complex problem can be solved overnight.

5. Finally, Spokoiny argues that **to navigate complexity requires an inspiring vision**. Too often in contemporary Jewish life our vision is only about stopping things: stop assimilation, stop antisemitism, stop BDS. Being merely a STOP sign, he rightly says, is nobody's definition of an inspiring dream.

So there you have it: a five point program that calls for diversity, curiosity, collaboration, patience, and vision.

Source: <https://www.brandeis.edu/hornstein/topics-in-leadership/Embrace-Complexity.html>