



## Lead or React

By Cindy Chazan

I recently read an article by Bari Weiss in *The New York Times* “*This pandemic demands something bigger of all of us. ...Let this be a re-calibration, the pandemic as a tuning fork to get back our pitch. What could be a better reminder of what really matters – and what absolutely doesn't?*”

I read this and think of our Jewish communal infrastructure.

I am in awe of what the Jewish community is doing now – the heroics of creating safety nets and loans and keeping communities sane during these challenging times.

But shouldn't we start at the same time to plan?

What have we learned?

I am concerned that the urgent is driving out the important.

Throughout the community – not just the Federation – people say to me, “I can't start thinking of what might be when this Pandemic is over – we're dealing with the vast unknown and I am too busy keeping what we have afloat and putting out fires”.

I fear that if leaders do not start talking about “what the new future might look like” we will likely be caught shockingly unprepared and blindsided by the chaos that will ensue.

Too many of us did not learn from the last recession: agencies hunkered down waiting for it to pass, and then tried extremely hard to prove their value.

At the same time Federations and agencies assumed the same major givers would come back at the same giving level before the last nasty recession, and they often just did not or at least took time getting back.

But this is not like the last time. No rule book has been written yet to deal with the future of the Jewish Community post-Pandemic as far as I know. This Pandemic has created new baselines in work, learning, healthcare, and governance. In fact, it's a hard reset on everything. It IS the great unknown, but that shouldn't stop us from thinking. Talking and pre-planning.

During the last recession there was talk about synagogues merging, agencies phasing out because they were weak and/or not serving the Jewish community, though serious adaptive change rarely happened.

Post 2008, some organizations overbuilt or became complacent again about recruiting, development and registration, expecting enough significant donors and benefactors to still be there. Many communities have large beautiful buildings with diminishing numbers of students or members, and this was true even pre-pandemic.

Post the last recession, private family foundations flourished with their own agenda (we are fortunate because of that) while still giving to Federation, which continued to believe in the rule of thumb – that at least 80% of the money comes from 20% of the donors.

What did we do to build a better grass roots foundation as some wealthy people chose to move away from that inner circle of donors and then were often ignored, and even shamed or blamed? [Shame on us!]

Post 2008 the innovation sector took off largely because wealth returned, and donors wanted to see and 'feel' where their money went and were looking for more personally meaningful forms of Judaism for themselves and/or their adult children.

In the last 12 years Federations and foundations have done good work in many communities.

At the same time, think about how much more money has successfully flowed into a new and innovative Jewish space (PJ Library, Birthright, Honeymoon Israel, Hillel and BBYO, Moishe House, Jewbelong, Mechon Hadar, BINA, new prayer spaces like

LabShul and The Kitchen, One Table and Jewish Camp are but a few great examples).

Millennials became our obsession. Federations and “old school legacy organizations” had to fight for attention, funds and relevancy. In many communities the Federation took on more and more programming themselves, often in conflict with or duplicating services offered by agencies and synagogues, so that as more and more people asked “What Does the Federation Do?” they could point to a plethora of programs the Federation took responsibility for, while funding agencies which probably should have been doing them, within their missions. As a result, a good number of beneficiary agencies suffered as funding, membership and relevancy diminished.

In some communities, these beneficiary agencies were dismissed as outdated and drifted, without leadership looking ahead to what roles to play in a changed world.

Thank GD Federations and some agencies survived because this is their new moment – IF they lead smartly and carefully. Federations are doing remarkable work right now and foundations (those who do grants) are collaborating in unprecedented fashion to provide meaningful support/loans.

The Jewish world will not have a choice post COVID to do business as usual. Conversations must start taking place immediately to plan for the New Future. But leaders tell me they are not quite ready because the basic survival needs of our communities are appropriately demanding time and money right now. So, who can think about the future?

I fear that just like Bari Weiss warns us, there are leaders who will wait out this pandemic with delusions that somehow all the money will return, staff they furloughed are waiting to be rehired, whether they should be or not, that everyone who paid dues, annual gifts or tuition (or all 3) will have the same intentions, commitments and dollars to “re-up.”

But I fear they will not or can not.

With fewer dollars, pragmatic decisions will have to be made by Leaders of the community and now is the time to prepare.

I recently heard Professor Ron Heifetz of Harvard University's Center for Public Leadership say that these times may actually present opportunities; that if we're smart,

we will start to reimagine what changes to anticipate rather than get defensive or caught off-guard or with false expectations..

There are lessons we should learn from this Pandemic so we can lead better in the future.

Maybe the New Normal will push us to change for the better and our knee jerk reaction to defensively push back will not have a place at the table.

There are thoughtful mergers to anticipate and begin to advocate, in order to be more responsible and efficient. New, practical goals must be considered with creative thinkers, requiring innovative roles for lay and professional leaders to problem solve.

Learning may continue to be done remotely as a new normal. How can we optimize these situations? How will a community with three congregations within a mile radius support 9 clergy and 3 pre-schools; moreover, should they?

Stubborn refusal to change will no longer be possible or tolerated, though empathy is still required. When in action mode we must actively make room for losses as a true test of leadership – to help people come to terms with loss at the rate they can tolerate [Heifetz]. We will need to differentiate between organizations and services, so that we can begin to re-calibrate what the community will need.

There are people beginning to think and plan and here's an example: Gidi Grinstein [an alum of the Wexner Israel Fellowship] founded TOM [ Tikkun Olam Makers] a nonprofit venture which since 2014 helped millions of people create and scale extremely affordable solutions to neglected needs of people with disabilities, the elderly and other disempowered communities. By 2018 TOM has operated in 22 countries and was recognized in *Forbes Magazine* as one of 15 tech companies to watch in 2018.

Journalist Tom Friedman said: "TOM addresses need, crowdsources the design and manufactures solutions for neglected problems for anyone anywhere."

One small example and one big one. A team of TOM volunteers in Tel Aviv recently created a customizable multipurpose open-source prosthesis, which was developed with the TOM community in Singapore. It was then adjusted for a single disabled Israeli girl who wanted to play the violin. It is [available on the TOM website](#) via free download. That prosthetic device cost \$60 – as opposed to the standard price of

several thousand dollars – and can be manufactured by maker spaces around the world for thousands of people with similar needs.

“Today, though, said Grinstein, TOM is “creating an online library of [open-source solutions for Covid-19](#), and we are working to build a bottom-up army of makers to distribute them all over the world. Our mission focuses us on the needs of smaller rural communities with weak health infrastructure and on the acute needs of senior homes, prisons and mental health facilities.”

“... now,” [Grinstein said], “with these new crowdsourcing platforms, we can enable every person to contribute talents to solving our collective problems, locally and globally, on a scale that is unprecedented.”

Imagine now untapped thinkers and doers in your community and do not be shy to ask for their wisdom, planning, finances, prioritizing, etc. Only relying on the Old Guard to be our visionaries will send us down a rabbit hole. But we can't afford to ignore history or alienating well-intentioned volunteers.

Thankfully, the stock market will come back, there will still be very wealthy people and successful Federations, agencies and foundations.

We will be expected to lead responsibly and more wisely, to have the ability to encourage our communities by leading with our own stamina, to have a systemized approach to roll out “re-opening,” and to explain truthfully that we're all in a learning mode, while at the same time encouraging our communities not to lose faith, AND not to be voyeurs but active participants in rethinking and remaking Jewish communities. This will not be easy.

We should not require slick perfection in order to give a concrete idea a chance. Instead, leadership requires us to become an early adopter of a novel solution.

Instead we must create a holding pattern for communities as we figure this out.

We Jews have been remarkably resilient – we got kicked out of our land and home communities not once, we moved to new countries and created new ways to practice Judaism without a Temple. Nothing ever can equal what happened to us under the Nazis, and all that seems to be so much more horrific than what we will be facing 3-6-12-18 months from now.

We are experiencing a terrible shock – but good can come from it if we work together and lead wisely. My own synagogue along with many others have divided the congregation into mini “kibbutzim,” expanding our social network and beginning to create “scaffolding” for now and the future.

The time to start thinking and planning is now. Now is when we need to plan and lead towards the future, as unknown as it is, so that we can develop a post pandemic vision to start out with. Now is the moment for both lay and Professional leaders in the Jewish Community to bring true grit, nimbleness and resilience to the New Normal. The parks in New Jersey opened today; so should our minds.

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