



We Have a Responsibility To Use Our Power – And Use It For the Greater Good

By Clare Goldwater and Cantor Michelle Bider Stone

As Marvel has woven its web across popular culture, a once obscure comment from one of its pulp comics has become a widespread maxim: “With great power comes great responsibility.” In recent years, however, leaders as varied as Lance Armstrong, Anthony Weiner, Larry Nasser, Ehud Olmert and Joe Arpaio have made it feel like the two concepts – power and responsibility – are divorced. Public discourse often presents us with an exclusive choice between the two, and, because we have seen so many people blatantly abuse their power, it feels like the responsible thing may be to just shy away from it.

This is the dilemma we face as educators and leaders today; how can we – as people who actively choose influence and, yes, even power, in order to do good in the world, learn to use that power with care, responsibility and humility? What will it take to build a communal culture of accountability that avoids the pitfalls of power and self-interest that are ever-present?

These are the types of question we hear from our own constituencies. How do we empower the classroom teacher who wants to promote a Jewish idea but feels constrained, not supported, by parents’ expectations? How do we enable an organizational leader to hone their clear vision for change when they feel unable to voice it for fear of losing donors? And how can we help a congregational rabbi both lead and serve their community when they feel diminished and limited by external communal politics?

Here it's not simply the abuse of power that is the problem. In these cases, the lack of power and the lack of models for how to responsibly exercise it, has a paralyzing and negative impact on our communities. Often, the fear of using power will lead the teacher, or leader, or rabbi, to paralysis: It's just easier to say nothing. Our community needs both the language of ethics and the skills of empowerment to answer questions like these as we build a network of responsible power.

These quandaries have driven our institutions – the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America and M2: The Institute for Experiential Jewish Education – to develop a new

community based initiative, “Power in 2020: Education & Leadership Between Corruption & Fear.”

The initiative will explore questions and practices around how Jewish ideas can help us understand the ethics of power, and how those with power might exercise their responsibility in a way that builds our community and lays the foundation for it to thrive and become resilient. The Shalom Hartman Institute will bring its expertise in applied, elevated Jewish text study, and M2: The Institute for Experiential Education will bring its expertise in relational learning and tools for self-reflection and implementation in educational organizations. Together we hope to tackle a challenge using ancient texts, a contemporary sensibility and a willingness to experiment

Piloting as a six-month fellowship for educators and leaders in the Los Angeles Jewish community in February 2020, the initiative is comprised of two 3-day gatherings and several follow-up meetings. After its pilot, we hope the model will iterate in more communities across the country in different formats.

We believe that an ongoing response to these questions – focusing on the potential of mutual accountability within a community context – is absolutely critical. Educators and leaders are invited to join a fellowship of colleagues who will build their own capacities to influence as well as accountability in their community. After participants have learnt together, they will continue to encounter each other in their daily lives; in schools, stores, synagogues and local restaurants. Because they are invested in each other and their community they will be held in a strong web of mutual support, responsibility and accountability that we believe can both mitigate abuses and clear the way for the responsible, and beneficial, expression of power.

For more on Power in 2020: Education & Leadership Between Corruption & Fear, visit the [program website](#).

For people in LA looking to apply, contact Cantor Michelle Bider Stone,
Michelle.Stone@shalomhartman.org

For other communities interested in this possibility, contact Clare Goldwater, clare@ieje.org

Cantor Michelle Bider Stone is the Los Angeles director for Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, where she oversees all programmatic activity and relationship management for Southern California.

Clare Goldwater is M²'s vice president for education. Based in Jerusalem, she is a Jewish educator and leadership coach with expertise in professional and organizational development and experiential education.

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