

## Flipping the Script

### From Strength to Strength

September 2019

It is great to see all of you here tonight – including new faces, community leaders, and a special welcome to Barry Shrage. Thank you for being here.

I want to reflect with you on some of what I've learned this year about CJP and our community. I was searching for the appropriate image or metaphor to capture the many voices I've heard, organizations I've visited, events I've attended, individuals with whom I've met, leaders and partners from whom I have learned. I realized that I don't have to go far . . . because it's on everything we produce. The Menorah.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out that:

In the ancient world, the most famous buildings were in the shape of pyramids. The shape was intentional – it was a statement of a hierarchical social order, ruled at the top by a pharaoh, then elites, then beneath them the laboring masses.

Judaism is a protest against this hierarchy.

Every human being, not just the king, is in the image and likeness of God. A leader does not stand above the people. The great symbol of biblical Israel, the menorah, is an *inverted* pyramid.

The Menorah flips the script of leadership in much the same way that our hyper-connected, networked, 21<sup>st</sup> century society flips civic, cultural and Jewish life.

Last year people said to me, "I think it's time that we blow open the doors and windows of this place; that we break down 'inner circles' and 'rooms where it happens' and really open this up to anyone who wants to be part of it." They were definitely referring to CJP, but also to Jewish life and community more broadly. You can feel something happening in our community, our society, our world of digital media, organizing and social movements, radical iconnectedness. You can feel what I would describe as a *democratizing impulse*.

And I can feel it in our community. People are saying: *We're done waiting* for civic or national leaders or rabbis or teachers or even a Federation on High Street, to transmit knowledge *to us*, to solve our problems *for us*, to mediate our cultural and spiritual journeys.

It's not that we don't need these leaders. But we want to be part of communities that engage and empower us. We are optimistic about the future but feel the pain of real challenges today – in our world and in our day-to-day lives. We don't want to be passive. We want to show up, learn, engage, act, and contribute to a better future.

I believe this impulse explains why so many of us every year attend events for hundreds of Jewish organizations, regardless of how rubbery the chicken is – just kidding, Andrew!

This impulse motivates those of us, of every age and demographic, who choose to learn – in Jewish schools or online, in Me'ah through Hebrew College, or self-organized groups with teachers who inspire us.

It inspires thousands of people a year to travel to Israel and other parts of the world – through our College Campus IACT initiative, our Boston-Haifa Connection, life-changing missions, and more.

This impulse is why we volunteer with the many community organizations that enable us to give back - both inside and outside the Jewish community, including spending countless hours – in joy and sometimes tears – on boards of organizations that we care so much about.

I believe this is also why over 1700 people showed up this year to be part our 360/Five listening tour.

And this is just the beginning, because our community wants, needs and is ready for broader and deeper engagement.

What is motivating us right now? Throughout the listening tour I heard about three paradoxes of the moment we're in.

One. We are a community of communities, made up of many strong institutions that we value dearly. At the same time, we know that they are vulnerable, too siloed, and need to keep adapting and evolving to continue to thrive. We have work to do.

Two. We are a warm and welcoming community with countless ways to connect to Jewish life. Just check JewishBoston.com - people could do something Jewish every night of the week! At the same time, there are *too many people* falling through the cracks or still on the margins, not sure how to find their way in or whether they will be

genuinely included if they do. Too many people who *are* seeking meaning and connection have not yet found it in Jewish life. We have work to do.

Three. We share so much in common. We are a community of learners, animated by big ideas, shared values and aspirations. We take pride in the greater whole that is the Greater Boston Jewish community. At the same time, we are deeply divided about how we interpret and apply our values, and about the best ways to reach our common destination. We have trouble even talking about what matters most to us, whether the topic is Israel or social justice or even how to confront antisemitism. We have work to do.

We know from our history, as Jews and Americans, that the answers, *the way forward*, will not come from on high nor from out there, but rather from in here (the heart) and in here (the room).

Nearly 2000 years ago we faced one of the greatest challenges and crises in Jewish history. The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem - our geographic, political, cultural and spiritual center - meant the end of the practice of Judaism as we knew it and an uncertain if not unlikely future of the Jewish People. Debates about how to respond reflected debates about values, beliefs and the nature of Judaism; the nature of the threats we faced; and the best and right way forward. Some focused on the past, some on the future; some on conserving what was and others on creating what would be; some on the threats from without, others on the flaws from within . . . sound familiar?

At our best, these debates make us stronger - built on a foundation of commitment, trust, and love. At our worst, these differences tear us apart – dividing us from within, even enabling those who would destroy us from without. I think this is what we fear when we talk about existential threat of polarization and divisiveness – both in our Jewish community and our broader society. This is why it is so critical that CJP and all of us find ways to come together *across our differences* to lift up different voices and create space for generative disagreement and dissent, in service of a shared mission, vision and future.

*We know how to do this.* Our community is home to many of the leading institutions of American democracy and leading institutions of Jewish pluralism – from day schools to a 21<sup>st</sup> century Mikvah to our historic, Jewish University. We have and will continue to light the way as a model of what it means for a community to stand together on the strength of our diversity rather than in spite of it.

And we can learn something about the way forward from the Rabbis' response 2000 years ago, which led to the creation of the Talmud, to the synagogue as we know it, to Jewish life and practice as we live it today. Rather than hold on to the hierarchy of the Priesthood that had defined spiritual and political life for centuries, they trusted in a connection that went back to Mount Sinai, and then they too flipped the script, inverted the hierarchy, turned the menorah of the Temple into the construct for Jewish community. Sacrifice, done only by Priests in THE Temple, became prayer, done by anyone anywhere, with synagogues defined not by bricks and mortar but by a minyan – a community, wherever it gathers. The sacrificial altar became the Shabbat table, in the home, where hyper-local, do-it-yourself Judaism put ritual in the hands of the parents, responsible for passing it on to their children in ways that would be relevant and meaningful to each generation. And the Priest – a position inherited by and reserved for a few, regardless of merit – became the teacher, the scholar, the learner, something open to and expected of *everyone*. Our tradition is the inheritance of our entire community.

In today's world, with technology at our fingertips, this really does mean everyone – regardless of background, age, gender; regardless of knowledge or Hebrew level; regardless of belief. *Anyone can learn, anywhere, anytime.*

Eleanor Roosevelt wrote: "The course of history is directed by the choices we make, and our choices grow out of the ideas, the beliefs, the values, the dreams of the people. It is not so much the powerful leaders that determine our destiny as the much more powerful influence of the combined voice of the people themselves."

This is the revolutionary idea of America and it is the radical, democratizing impulse that has defined Judaism since the Rabbis reimagined a bold future millennia ago.

The organizing power of CJP would not be possible without the partnerships and networks of institutions and individuals that are represented in this room tonight.

When I look back on this past year, I think of the conversations that began with the 360/Five. Even as they continue to unfold, they are already shaping our community's future.

I think of the thousands of people – of every background, every religious and political affiliation, every generation; friends and allies, who stood together in tears on Boston Common the day after the massacre at the Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh.

And then I think of another, similarly diverse gathering of our community, not in the aftermath of crisis, but in celebration of Israel's 71<sup>st</sup> birthday when 2000 people gathered

together in joy, togetherness, and love – for Israel and for one another. Every time I look at that picture – the front page of our calendar - it gives me hope.

In his recent book, *The Soul of America*, Jon Meacham paraphrases a description of the United States' Founders' vision of happiness: "Beginning with the Declaration of Independence, the pursuit of happiness – the pursuit of the good of the whole, because the good of the whole was crucial to the genuine well-being of the individual, and vice-versa – became part of the fabric of our young nation."

When I read this, I immediately thought of the Jewish idea: "Kol Yisrael Arevim zeh l'zeh" – All of Israel is bound up with, and collectively responsible for one another." *We are in this together*. Because we believe in the idea of a covenant that has bound us together for eternity; because we believe in the interconnectedness of all people and all things – locally and globally. Because we know that being part of a greater story, a long, complex past and a still-unfolding future redeems us from loneliness and disconnection, and adds meaning, purpose and joy to our individual lives.

We need one another, and the world needs us to *be* together and to *work* together, to find creative and collective solutions to our most challenging problems. Because the paradoxes that I heard on my Listening Tour, the challenges keep me and I know so many of you up at night, are not ones that we can solve alone.

*This is where CJP comes in, and this is where you come in.*

On the one hand, CJP's core work has been constant since our founding: *strategically investing philanthropic resources and organizing and mobilizing people to create a thriving Jewish community that does its part to better the Jewish People, Israel and the world*. At the same time, the world is changing, CJP needs to change, and how we do our work, in partnership with all of you, needs to evolve.

This will require all of us to learn and grow, to take risks and dream big about what is possible.

Imagine dynamic collaborations between schools, synagogues, JCC's, and more – that make broader and deeper engagement with Jewish life more accessible and compelling.

Imagine tackling the emerging challenge of housing for the elderly so Greater Boston is the model community for combating social isolation and ensuring that members of our community and beyond are aging with dignity.

Imagine new community-wide education initiatives that increase the knowledge, comfort-level and confidence of people from every background – opening up Jewish wisdom to all and enhancing our intellectual, moral and spiritual discourse.

Imagine our next generation not only falling in love with Israel on a 10-day trip, but also stepping up, giving, leading the way for our whole community, and taking the future into their own hands.

Imagine a robust civil discourse that is broad and deep enough to make room for many, conflicting voices without shaming, litmus testing, or running back into our echo-chambers.

Imagine leadership development platforms here and in Israel that attract and grow passionate and committed people who learn and work together, deepen relationships and mutual understanding, strengthen our institutions and communities, and tackle our most challenging problems.

This is our promise: Invest with us and in this community, connect with us and across the community –participate, learn, volunteer, lead, give – whether \$18 or \$18 million – and we will work to ensure that your precious time, your tzedakah, your philanthropic investment – goes further and has an outsized impact.

When you leave here tonight, decide what role you want to play in shaping our future. Keep showing up to events – we're all busy but your presence matters. Find a group to learn with, there's no better time to start than now. Make a gift – however large or small – to CJP or another organization you care about. Volunteer, step up, lead – there is enough work to go around!

Thank you – for being here tonight, for being in this with us, and for fueling the lights of the Menorah that is our Jewish community.

I wish us all a Shanah tovah and a great year ahead!