

CEO WELCOME – JFGN MAJOR’S DINNER 1/7/26
The Long Game: Patience, Purpose, and Building Legacy

Good evening, everyone.

I'd like to start with a short story. Some of you know that I transitioned to the Jewish Federation after 30 years in education, from substitute teacher in my college days all the way through Head of School and Superintendent.

Recently, a former mathematics colleague asked me to review a word problem they were working on. I didn't hesitate... though I see some of you already starting to sweat! Don't worry...it's an elementary school problem.

A teacher tells Sarah you just received your weekly \$5 allowance. You get a text message from a friend who needs to borrow \$2, and another friend texts you that she wants \$1 for another friend's gift. How much do you have left? Sarah thinks for a moment and then replies... \$5... and two unread text messages!

There's a fine line between humor and reality. Most of us come from generations who were taught that when someone reaches out, you reply. But the world doesn't work that way anymore.

Tonight, I want to talk about something that does work, something that's kept the Jewish people alive for thousands of years: the power of patience, the wisdom of the long game, and the courage to build legacy when the world demands instant results.

These aren't just nice ideas. They're survival strategies. And they're exactly what we need right now as we build this community together.

Lesson #1: Patience is the Ultimate Jewish Superpower

Our tradition is built on patience. It's woven into the fabric of who we are as a people.

The very first consequence in the Garden of Eden wasn't death, it was labor. "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food." Gd could have said, "You'll be punished immediately." Instead: "You'll work the land. Plant. Wait. Harvest." Patience became the human condition.

Four hundred years of slavery in Egypt. Forty years wandering in the desert. Moses struck a rock in frustration because he couldn't wait for Gd's timing, and that impatience cost him entry into the Promised Land.

Noah spent 120 years building an ark while his neighbors mocked him. Joseph endured slavery, false imprisonment, and years of obscurity before rising to second-in-command of Egypt. Jacob worked seven years for Rachel, got tricked into marrying Leah, then worked another seven years... fourteen years total! The Torah tells us those years "seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her."

Samson's strength was tied to his hair, a time-bound phenomenon. He couldn't rush it. Even biblically supernatural power required patience.

Our entire history is a masterclass in delayed gratification. Patience isn't just a virtue in Judaism, it's our superpower. It's how we've survived for thousands of years when empires that tried to destroy us have crumbled into dust.

This is precisely why the Jewish Federation exists, to be the organization that looks down the road, that plans not for next quarter but for the next generation. While individual organizations focus on their membership and agencies focus on their clients, the Federation is the only institution whose job is to ask: What will our entire Jewish community need five, ten, twenty years from now?

That requires patience. That requires resisting the pressure for immediate results. That's the long game.

Lesson #2: Instant Gratification is Destroying Legacy

Now contrast that with where we are today.

We live in an instant gratification society, accelerating at a pace that would have been unimaginable even a generation ago.

"Snail mail" became email. Email became instant messaging. Have you ever sent a message with typos? Would you talk to someone in typos?

Shopping used to mean driving to a store. Then ordering online with a week's wait. Then overnight delivery. Now same-day delivery, and if it takes more than a few hours, we have the *chutzpah* to be frustrated.

Fashion trends were seasonal. Then monthly magazines accelerated the cycle. Now influencers receive products before they hit stores, and trends die before most people hear about them.

News required journalism, reporters investigating, editors fact-checking, papers printing. Then 24-hour cable news. Now TikTok videos with millions of views before anyone verifies if they're true.

Research required a library, encyclopedias, hours of searching. Then Google. Now predictive search finishes your question before you've asked it.

Here's what's deeply concerning: Every generation has tried to improve on the previous one. That's been the promise of progress, work hard, and your children will have it better. But our children and grandchildren represent the first generation in modern history predicted to not out-earn their parents. The first generation facing the real possibility that their latter years won't be as comfortable, as secure, as hopeful as previous generations.

And when you don't believe the future will be better, when you can't trust the long game will pay off, what do you do? You grab what you can now. You chase instant gratification because waiting feels like losing. Despair replaces hope. Speed replaces strategy.

But here's what our people have always known: hope is not naïve, it's strategic. Israel's national anthem is called *HaTikvah* ("The Hope"). Not "The Certainty." Not "The Guarantee." The *Hope*. We've survived as a people because we've always believed tomorrow could be better than today, even when today was slavery, exile, persecution.

That's what the Jewish Federation does, it institutionalizes hope. It says, "We're investing in tomorrow even when today is uncertain."

That's precisely why what we're building here matters so much.

Lesson #3: In Established Communities You Maintain; Here You Create

When I started in Jewish communal service, strategic plans were written with seven to ten-year projections. You planned for a decade because you were building institutions meant to last generations.

Today? Strategic plans are three to five years, often rewritten before they expire. Everything moves faster. Everything demands immediate results. Show me the impact now. Prove the ROI this quarter.

In established communities, the ones many of you came here from, that makes sense. Those communities are maintaining infrastructure that's already built, sustaining institutions their grandparents founded, preserving what exists. Philanthropic dollars go toward maintenance: new carpeting for a synagogue, updating technology in a JCC, supporting programs that have run for decades.

That's not a criticism, it's necessary work. But it's fundamentally different from what we're doing here.

Here, we're not maintaining, we're creating. We're not preserving, we're building. We haven't been put out to pasture; we're planting the orchard. I've been here over a year and still haven't met a second-generation Jewish Neapolitan!

Look back just five years. Could anyone have imagined today's Jewish Naples? Explosive population growth. A 22,000-square-foot Jewish cultural center built collectively. Naples was named one of the fastest-growing places in America... and one of the best places to live!

And the Jewish community? We're not just keeping pace, we're leading. We're defining what Jewish life looks like. We're writing the playbook as we go.

In established communities, you follow tradition. Here, you set it.

Lesson #4: Counter-Cultural is in Our DNA

I know what some of you might be thinking: "But society is moving toward speed, instant results, short-term thinking. Shouldn't we adapt?"

Here's the beautiful truth: Jews have always been counter-cultural. It's in our DNA.

When everyone else worshipped idols, Abraham believed in one Gd. When empires demanded assimilation, we kept our traditions. When the world said, "might makes right," we said "justice and compassion matter more." When society told us to blend in, we stood out. When they told us to give up, we survived.

Being counter-cultural isn't a bug in our system, it's our added feature!

Just because society is sprinting toward instant gratification doesn't mean we have to. The things that matter most, relationships, community, legacy, meaning, take time. They require patience. They demand the long game.

There's a Talmudic story about Honi the Circle Maker. He was called this because once, during a drought, he drew a circle in the sand, stood inside it, and told Gd he wouldn't move until it rained... and it did! That's the kind of stubborn patience our tradition celebrates.

In another story, Honi saw an old man planting a carob tree. "How long will it take to bear fruit?" he asked. "Seventy years," the man replied. Honi was incredulous: "Do you really think you'll live long enough to eat from it?" The old

man answered, "I found carob trees in the world because my ancestors planted them for me. So I plant for my children and grandchildren."

We get to model that here. We get to say, "Yes, the world is moving fast, but we're building something meant to last." We're planting trees we might not live to see bear fruit, trusting that our descendants will in our absence.

That's not naïve. That's not outdated. That's wisdom.

Lesson #5: To Get, You Must First Give

Let me bring this home with something you all understand intuitively: the paradox of giving.

To get something truly valuable, connection, meaning, community, joy, you have to give first. Not just a little. Give generously, consistently, without knowing exactly what you'll get back.

Look at our Women's Cultural Alliance and Men's Cultural Alliance. People move here knowing virtually no one. They're successful, comfortable financially, but isolated. Disconnected. Then they encounter the WCA or MCA, and someone invites them to give... their time, energy, presence.

What happens? They get back so much more than they gave. Friendships. Community. Purpose. Belonging. A second chapter richer than they imagined possible.

The more they give, the more they get. It's not transactional, it's transformational.

Or look at our King David Society for households giving \$20,000 or more annually. Last year, we had thirteen households giving at that level. For a community our size, we could have left it there. But instead, we have the type of leadership who challenged us and asked, "What if we brought these leaders together? Created fellowship, shared vision, collaborative impact?"

Today, I am incredibly proud to share that we have over twenty-five member households. Why? Because when you show people the impact, the connection, the meaning, they want in. They elevate their commitment because the return on investment isn't financial. It's communal. Spiritual. Legacy.

Here's the business metaphor you all understand: The best investments require patience and discipline. You don't panic when the market dips. You don't chase quick returns. You invest for the long term, trusting that compound interest, whether financial or relational, works its magic over time.

How many of you started a college fund for a child or grandchild within months of their birth? These babies were in diapers, and we were investing in their future. It's ingrained in our DNA!

That's what we're doing here. We're not looking for the quick fix. We're building a long-term strategy, one relationship, one program, one dollar at a time.

Lesson #6: Your Name Outlives Your Years

Here's a question Rabbi Cohen will challenge us with later: What will they say about us when we're gone?

But I want to add a layer: How many generations will remember us? And what will they remember us for?

Most of us will be remembered by our friends and children. Gd willing, many by our grandchildren. Even fewer by our great-grandchildren. And then who?

To be remembered beyond that, we need to attach our name to something bigger than ourselves.

In established communities, that's harder to do. Buildings and programs are already named. Endowments are set. Legacy gifts are established. But not here.

Here each of us can be part of building the legacy. Here, our gift can establish a program that didn't exist before. Here, our vision can shape what this community becomes for generations.

Here we're not just remembered as someone who gave. We're remembered as someone who built.

That's not ego. That's legacy. That's attaching our name to something perpetual, just like the endowment wall being created right now.

Lesson #7: Reverse-Engineering Legacy Starts Tonight

And last, but by no means least... After dinner, we're going to hear from Rabbi Daniel Cohen about his book, *What Will They Say About You When You Are Gone?* He's going to teach us about "reverse-engineering" our life, starting from the end and working backward so we can live today with purpose and passion.

But before he does, I want to frame what you're about to hear with what's happening right now in this community.

We are at a pivotal moment. The decisions we make this year, the commitments, the investments, the patience we exercise, will determine what this community looks like not just next year, but twenty years from now. Fifty years from now. A century from now.

Since October 7th, everything has changed. The rise of anti-Semitism isn't just a headline, it's a daily reality. We established a full-time JCRC to build relationships with elected officials, educators, and interfaith leaders. We need to significantly increase our security infrastructure and partnership with the Secure Community Network. We need to expand social services as our community grows. We need to invest in our infrastructure because increased engagement means increased costs.

These aren't sexy initiatives. They're not immediate gratification. They're the long game.

But they're also the foundation. They're what ensures that the community we're building today will be here, strong, safe, and vibrant, for the generations who come after us.

For those of you who've already pledged and given to this year's Annual Community Campaign, thank you.

For those who haven't yet committed, I'm excited to share that we received a wonderfully generous offer to match every increase from last year's gifts committed this evening, up to \$25,000. Will you join us and help us get a 100% return on your investment tonight?

Close...

You know, Sarah in that earlier math problem identified something profound. She had \$5. She could have replied to those text messages, given away what she had, and been left with \$2. Instead, she chose patience. She chose to protect what she had while she figured out the right response.

But we're not Sarah. We're not ignoring the messages. We're responding, but we're responding with wisdom, with strategy, with the long view.

Tonight, you've heard seven Jewish characteristics of patience, hope, and legacy. These aren't just abstract ideas. They're the blueprint for what we're building together.

The Federation looks down the road when too many are focused on right now. We institutionalize hope when the world is drowning in despair. We create rather than maintain. We embrace being counter-cultural because it's in our DNA. We give in order to get what truly matters. We attach our names to something that outlasts us. And we reverse-engineer our legacy starting right now.

Every dollar you invest tonight doesn't just fund programs. It plants trees. It builds foundations. It creates the community that will be here long after all of us, strong, safe, vibrant, and worthy of the patience it took to build it.

This isn't about instant gratification. This is about eternal impact.

So, we're asking you tonight: Please choose patience over panic? Please choose legacy over the quick fix? And please choose to be remembered not just as someone who gave, but as someone who built?

Because that's what founders do. That's what patience creates. That's what hope looks like in action.

Thank you. And let's enjoy a wonderful dinner together... because we are Stronger Together.