

## **When A Leader Incurs Guilt: Fundraising, Community Building And The Ethics Of Change**

Barry Shrage

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Ethics in leadership requires more than avoidance of unethical behavior. In fact, there are times when ethical behavior requires change and risk-taking to move an organization to achieve new goals—particularly at times of crisis in the life of an organization, a community or a people. At such times the status quo itself may be unethical because it is an avoidance of choice that misses opportunities and allows leaders to operate on automatic pilot. Over time, institutions can become ethically frozen, forget their mission and allow means to become confused with ends.

When fundraising becomes the end as well as the means we can come to believe that anything we do to sustain our campaign is justifiable. Writing a letter urging clemency is the most obvious manifestation of the problem, but in my view it is not the most serious one. Every time we turn away from needed change to avoid “rocking the boat,” and “hurting the campaign,” we endanger our mission and our community. Frozen institutions are inherently unethical.

The Federation movement is particularly susceptible to this kind of ethical blindness, especially at times like this when we face a time of radical change requiring a paradigm shift in our thinking and our work. In other words, we have become deeply embedded in a way of doing business that has done much good but has now hit a crisis. The end of the crisis must be ethical revival through a painful process of personal and communal change.

This process is always difficult, but will be particularly challenging and interesting in an organization as complex as a Federation. It is also challenging and frighten-

ing for leaders. Not only the Federation, but many Orthodox and other Jewish institutions now face hard ethical questions. Last year the newspapers were filled with stories about respected leaders who wrote letters of support for Mark Rich. *The Boston Globe* called and asked what I thought about those people and those actions. What could I say? Some of the people involved are the very best people in the Jewish world. Ethical people and decent people, my friends and mentors. These are people who I love, yet they wrote those letters.

If we work in communities or organizations for many years we come to respect and love our donors and constituents. The people who wrote those letters did not only claim that the men they wrote about were rehabilitated. I would go so far as to say that they may have come to have real affection for the men in exile or prison who had been charitable to their organizations and the causes they represented. Such is the complexity of the tasks we face. This is not to rationalize anyone's actions, but it is to say that none of us can afford to be self-righteous. In the real world, all of us face difficult challenges and not all of our actions will be above reproach.

The ethical vision of a Federation can be very beautiful, but also quite complicated. Is a Federation in business to help develop and help implement a vision of the Jewish future, or is the Federation in business simply to raise money? Allow me to state the obvious: You cannot implement the vision without the money. Since funding is required to implement even the loftiest vision, it is fair to say that a highly motivated individual who has a vision of the kind of world he or she wants

to create may be more susceptible to “doing whatever it takes” to raise the money to accomplish the goal than a person who is just carrying out the old institutional paradigm in the usual way. Either way, “sin crouches at the door” and as our tradition tells us, Jewish leadership carries with it the inevitability of sin through action or inaction (“When a leader incurs guilt...” Lev. 4:22).

A personal note: I have always found it difficult to conduct “business as usual” as a Federation professional. I came from a middle class Bronx family that had little to do with the Federation. The most important organizational experiences I had before I became involved in the Jewish community were as a member of the New Left during the 60s. Inevitably, I found myself asking these questions: “What is this work really all about? What is the meaning in this enterprise? How do we find the meaning in this work? What is our mission? How do we find our way?”

In *parshat beshalah* we see the problem of a Jewish community trying to wrestle with decision-making in the absence of a compelling moral vision. In other words, they don’t have the Torah yet. They literally do not know where they are going. They are thirsty, and the rabbinic interpretation of thirst is always, “Thirsty for Torah.” They were thirsty for a direction, for a vision, for a mission, and in the absence of these, their moral compass was deeply confused. The moral ethical vision of Egypt was dead and discredited, but the new moral vision of Torah had not yet been received. I would say that the American Jewish community today is really very much in that position. In other words, we had a certain vision, indeed several visions, of what we were in business for. Those visions have disintegrated.

The first vision of the Jewish Federation developed when our grandparents and great grandparents came here between 1890 and 1910. The vision was of communities and institutions helping immigrants settle in this country and in an organized way and, of course, raising the money necessary to accomplish these charitable goals. That first period was very much about assimilation, which was not a dirty word in those days. It was about helping American Jews to become fully American. We did what we had to do to raise the money to make that happen. Now I would say that the ethical balance—the ability to be ethical in our fundraising—was probably stronger in that period than in the second

“sacred survival” era of Jewish communal life, simply because the stakes seemed much lower in the first part of the twentieth century than in the second.

Jonathan Woocher described the second era of American Jewish life, “the era of sacred survival.” as the era of “sacred survival.” It dramatically raised the stakes in our fundraising. The sacred survival era began in 1967 with the Six-Day War and it raised Jewish pride to a tremendous level. Not only the Six-Day War, but also the Black Power Movement changed the *zeitgeist* of the American Jewish community. For the first time we were encouraged to be proud of being what we were. For the first time, it became a good thing to be a hyphenated American. But it wasn’t cultural pride that emerged from the sacred survival era after the Six-Day War. It was, instead, a deep concern about Jewish physical survival. It was a commitment to making Israel strong enough to withstand all its enemies so that there would never be another Holocaust and so that the Jews would survive. The Six-Day War began with fear of annihilation and ended in triumph, and the 1973 War began with fear of annihilation and ended in uncertainty. When you are in that mode, you can do anything you want to raise money. In the sacred survival era we were of course meticulous about following the law, but beyond that almost any kind of pressure was acceptable. We were, after all, raising money to save lives, so when one donor solicited another, it seemed acceptable to use almost any kind of pressure to get the prospect to give far more than he or she ever dreamed of giving.

The vision of the modern federation movement and its purpose was built in those days. Its persona and the way it is perceived to this very day developed during the sacred survival era. How many people do we run into who say something like, “I will not give the Federation a damn penny because I remember how the president of the Federation, humiliated my father thirty years ago. He brought my father to tears.” This is not an unusual story. If you wanted to be a good Jew in those days you gave a hundred dollars. If you wanted to be a great Jew, you gave a thousand dollars. If you wanted to be the best Jew in the world, you gave a million dollars. The level of honor—of *kavod*—was related to the amount of money you gave. This has always been true and of course the money did save many lives, but the long-term results were also deeply problematic from a communal standpoint.

There is a church outside Chicago called the Willow Creek Community Church that teaches an important lesson. My friend Len Schlesinger developed a Harvard Business School case study based on the Church and its market research. What did the Willow Creek Community Church discover? Why did people hate the church before it restructured itself and changed its culture? They rejected the Church because they felt that it cared more about their money than about their souls or about them as human beings. Of course, this sounds familiar. Let's think about the paradox here. We are trying to strengthen the Jewish community. We are trying to build a strong State of Israel. We are trying to raise every penny we can to strengthen Israel and to rescue Jews and in the course of doing this we are alienating them! We are bringing some people in and we are alienating thousands of others. They feel less and less connected because they believe that their connection is largely based on money. When community organizing becomes synonymous with fundraising, we become risk averse, vision disappears and the community is weakened.

I make it a point to try to see two or three people a day, at least one or two who I have never met before. I cannot tell you how many people say, "I know what the Federation is all about. It's all about money." This includes people who have a lot of money and give us a lot of money. Yet it is not the most beautiful vision in the world or a prescription for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Now that the sacred survival period has ended, the question for the Jewish community regarding our mission becomes even more intense. Part of the problem with the UJC merger, which generally is a good thing, is that a huge proportion of the leadership continues to focus on, "How much money do we raise and what proportion of it goes overseas?" to the exclusion of almost every other serious discussion. The idea that everything in the Federation world is measured by how much money we raise—or similarly that an Orthodox organization is measured only by the number of souls it saves—leads to problems. It can lead to moral blindness and it can lead to ethical narrowness.

The Federation movement raises nearly a billion dollars a year. It has enormous potential power to define a

vision for the American Jewish community and that power brings with it enormous responsibility.

The Boston Federation raises over \$26 million for the annual fund and millions more for endowments and capital campaigns of various kinds. This level of resource demands responsibility and vision. The failure to give leadership under these conditions is itself an unethical act. That is why we must ask ourselves each day what we stand for, what kind of community we want, what our communities teach, what kind of story we want to tell our children. And most importantly: What do we need to do and how we need to use resources to implement our vision?

This ethical decision-making is not easy, not at all easy. When we make decisions, we must ask ourselves which ethical worldview motivates us. Are we operating out of professional ethics as social workers who are value free and interested only in the good of the individual? Are we operating out of Jewish values? Are we operating out of Orthodox Jewish values? Are we operating out of communal values that are created by the Federation system and the Federation world? Which set of ethics are we operating out for any given decision? Ultimately it comes down to: What kind of community are we trying to create? What does Jewish history and the God of Israel demand?

In the course of our last Boston Strategic Plan, it became absolutely imperative to enunciate some kind of vision of Jewish life, even if it was bound to alienate some portion of the Jewish community. In other words, we needed to risk some of the stability that is essential to fundraising in order to move toward a new vision and new priorities.

Underneath it all were always the core questions: What are we raising this money for? What is the vision of the Jewish community that we want to create?

Our strategic planning process was organized to create dialogue with as many people as possible, to share the vision we had developed over the prior few years, and to listen to the concerns of the community. It would be wrong if I told you that we achieved complete community consensus. If twenty percent of the Jews of Boston have the vaguest idea of what we are doing, I would say that we are ahead of the game. Yet we did

make an attempt to bring several thousands of people into the dialogue. We made a commitment to do this by going to every grassroots institution and organization we could find. Outreach into the synagogues. Outreach into the Community Centers. And our vision in Boston actually evolved as we created our Strategic Plan. Outreach to inter-married was not part of the vision at the beginning. It was integrated because we listened to what people were saying. We tried to listen to what people were saying and integrate new ideas into an evolving vision for our community.

But our vision was not completely open-ended. We began with a vision based on a conception of Jewish history and a critique of our Federation at the end of the sacred survival era. We believed that Jewish learning and culture and synagogue renewal were central to our Jewish renaissance and we had learned that there was a real hunger for Jewish learning and community within the leadership and at the grassroots. Our Strategic Plan called upon our community to create a norm of Jewish literacy and Jewish learning starting with adults and families. We have made real progress—not just because of what we’re doing, but because the times are right for a vision that emphasizes meaning and roots and engagement with our tradition as a way of finding meaning in the world.

In addition to creating communities of Torah, we committed ourselves to creating communities of *hesed* (caring). We believe that the very idea of community is disintegrating in America. This is a disaster for the Jewish people and it can only be remedied by strengthening grassroots, face-to-face communities. This means that communities can only be strengthened by providing volunteer energy at the grass-roots of the Jewish community so that every synagogue—even a synagogue with twelve hundred family members—can actually feel like it cares about a disabled member, about an elderly member, about a person who needs help. There is no such thing as communities of Torah, if they are not embedded in a real sense of community where human beings care about each other.

That is one of the things that we as an Orthodox com-

munity have to share. Most of our communities actually do function more or less as communities of caring. Perhaps this is because most Orthodox congregations are small or because we live near each other or because *Shabbat* is a ready-made part of what it means to create a real sense of community, or because our children go to the same schools. For all kinds of reasons we know how to create caring communities.

Finally, we stated that as a community of Torah and a community of *hesed*, we could never be complete unless we were also a community of social justice. This demands serious outreach into the inner city and extensive engagement in creating a better world for all the people of Greater Boston.

In the end, we were able to create a real consensus, a broad consensus around the need to accomplish all these goals at the same time. Create warm, caring communities. Create communities of Torah where Jewish literacy is a norm, and create within those communities of Torah and *hesed* a commitment and a norm for engagement in the world and for social justice.

All together we tried to create a complete philosophy of Jewish life. We tried to develop a vision and not just a series of programs. We tried to develop a vision of commitment to a Jewish life not just a Jewish lifestyle and a commitment to real community within which Jewish values could be lived and where Jewish learning could be transmitted to a new generation. We took risks and helped change our organization and our community. None of this guarantees ethical leadership but it is I think a prerequisite for ethical leadership. As my friend Michael Hammer is fond of saying, “If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will get you there.”

None of this is easy. I know many will perceive conflicts for an Orthodox person helping to develop a vision that includes Torah, *tsedek* and *hesed*, but also outreach to interfaith families. There are conflicts and there are tensions, but they are positive conflicts and tensions. Engaging these tensions allows for the possibility of success. Avoiding them assures only failure.