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Jim Joseph Foundation *Madrichim Narrative*

Make Our Garden Grow: Building Leadership Ecosystems

“Leadership crisis” is a well-accepted mantra in the field of Jewish education and beyond. According to Jerry Silverman of The Jewish Federations of North America, in the next decade or so, 70%-80% of the executive positions in Jewish organizations will turn over and, in his words, “there is no bench.” This year four of the largest, most successful, well-respected, well-funded Jewish community day schools in North America are all searching for new Heads of School—*at the same time!*

As I see it, the “leadership crisis” boils down to three essential challenges:

1. We are not recruiting enough talented and passionate people with leadership and management capacities at any stage of their careers into the field of Jewish education.
2. We are not fully cultivating or developing the potential leaders and managers who are currently in our educational institutions to successfully generate a healthy pipeline of leadership at every level.
3. We are not nurturing or sustaining the people who currently serve in senior leadership positions to maximize their potential and longevity.

Foundations including The Jim Joseph Foundation (JJF) have commissioned studies and worked with universities and other organizations to create professional development programs for leaders and teachers in day schools, camps, and supplementary schools. Many of these efforts ought to be expanded and replicated. JJF and others should continue to research, evaluate, learn from, and invest in these and other programs and increase the numbers of leaders and potential leaders who benefit from them.

But, it is also time to go beyond leadership development programs. This is about more than training and recruitment, both of which are essential. There is untapped potential waiting to be realized in people who are currently working in our educational institutions and in people who have not yet realized that their calling is to become a Jewish educational leader. We can realize this potential if we *turn our Jewish educational institutions into ecosystems for leadership learning and growth.*

Leadership is contextual and, like the best professional development for teachers, leadership development needs to focus on the context, the entire system, in which leadership occurs. Often, for example, leadership development programs that take people out of their own institutions magnify the frustration of leaders because the institutions in

which they lead are inhospitable to the skills and capacities they are developing and to the leadership they might provide, let alone to their continued growth and professional fulfillment.

JJF can lead the field in taking a broader, deeper, whole system view of what it will take to create environments where Jewish leaders and Jewish leadership, in theory and in practice, will flourish. We need this whole system approach toward individual institutions and toward Jewish education more broadly.

I suggest that JJF invest in the cultivation of leadership ecosystems, or “learning organization” centers of excellence, where the commitment to providing outstanding and transformative learning experiences for young Jews is matched (and fueled) by a parallel commitment to developing outstanding, reflective, creative, collaborative, educational leaders and managers. Each ecosystem would develop its own internal leadership pipelines, explicitly aspiring to recruit and grow leaders who will either rise up the ranks of its own institution or, more likely, move on to leadership roles in other institutions. Over the next 5-10 years, these new leaders will become “gardeners” of new ecosystems, building the capacities of leaders and institutions across the field of Jewish education.

Some of the defining elements of these leadership ecosystems would include:

- *A culture of learning, growth, and reflective practice:* shared beliefs that leaders can learn to lead just as great teachers can learn to teach; budgets that prioritize professional development, growth, and renewal; coaching and mentoring as normative practices throughout the organization; use of case studies, “after action reviews” and other modalities that support leaders’ collaborative inquiry into their work; leaders and managers who have the time and the resources to prioritize hiring, supervision, and evaluation
- *A strategic, high-performing board and professional leadership team:* the appropriate number of senior and mid-level leaders whose skills and capacities complement one another and match the strategic objectives of the educational institution¹; competitive salaries for senior leaders in addition to heads and executive directors; a board trained in governance, committed to reflecting on its practices and building its own culture of leadership development
- *Passionate, knowledgeable, and committed Jewish leading and learning:* a clear vision and shared understanding of the Jewish educational mission of the institution and how

¹ I outlined my vision of Leadership Teams in Ravsak’s HaYidion, Spring 2012
<http://www.ravsak.org/news/548/169/It-Doesn-t-Have-To-Be-Lonely-At-the-Top-Developing-High-Functioning-Leadership-Teams/d,HaYidion>

purposeful Jewish living and learning inform the strategy, decision-making, and overall leadership and management culture and practice²

- A well-developed conception of *“followership”* as critical for the success of leaders and managers; a clear understanding on the part of all stakeholders of their role in supporting and “authorizing” their leaders to lead
- *Stable annual budgets to help avoid reactive, short-term leadership*: resources supporting the annual budget and educational programs so leaders can think creatively and strategically beyond the immediate financial demands of tomorrow; endowments and multi-year programmatic support that allow for the allocation of time and resources to leadership development and institutional capacity building
- *Aggressive recruitment and development of new talent*: a steady stream of early-career professionals with leadership and management potential on the educational and non-educational sides of the institution; funding for creative job opportunities such as internships and “residencies” to make space for these “new recruits” in the institution; effective hiring and performance management practices; the expectation that some early-career leaders will move on to lead in other institutions
- *Collaborative partnerships* with university schools of education and Jewish studies, business schools, foundations, and leadership development programs; research, evaluation, and documentation of leadership models, programs, and initiatives, including successes and failures, from which other schools will learn
- *Increased thought leadership by and collaboration between local, national, and international Jewish educational leaders*: more well-developed theories, or mental models, of what Jewish educational leadership means; moving the discourse beyond one of survival and continuity (of our institutions or of Judaism) to a more creative, strategic visioning about the future of Judaism, the Jewish community, and Jewish education

We know that if our Jewish educational institutions are going to survive and thrive into the next generation, *we need to dramatically increase the numbers of Jewish educational leaders* who have the *vision and creativity* to inspire, evolve, and adapt; the *management skills* to build institutional capacity, strategize, and translate mission and vision into practice; and the *passion for Jewish learning and living* to ensure that the communities and educational institutions they lead are deeply rooted in and draw inspiration from the vision of Judaism toward which they are educating. Turning our Jewish educational institutions into leadership ecosystems is the only way we will achieve this. *Changing the face of Jewish educational leadership will strengthen individual institutions and, as a natural outgrowth, will make our garden—the field of Jewish education—blossom and grow.*

² My ELI Talk entitled “Jewish Educational Leadership with Soul” attempted to illustrate one approach to what I called Jewishly or religiously purposeful leadership: <http://elitalks.org/video/marc-baker>