

Jim Joseph Sabbatical  
Rachel Levin • October, 2012

I have been thinking a lot lately about the new iPhone 5. Not about the phone itself per se, but about the fact that two million people pre-ordered the phone within the first 24 hours of the announcement of its launch. The iPhone's sleek new design and faster processor only partially account for this purchasing frenzy. Most people who bought the phone sight unseen did so because the phone was *new* and we live in a culture obsessed with the new. We covet the newest gadget, latest version, most updated feature – even when we have yet to master the devices we currently have.

Maybe then it is no accident that Apple always seems to release its new phone around the Jewish New Year. Rosh Hashanah comes as a corrective to this fascination with the new for its own sake. Yes it is a time to welcome a new year, eat new fruits, and -- at least when I was young -- buy a new pair of shoes. But Rosh Hashanah's core blessing is not a blessing of the new for the sake of newness. Rather we ask that we be *renewed* for a good and sweet year; newness as a critical process not obsession or fad.

Which brings me to a very old idea that if implemented would have a profound effect on Jewish education and Jewish life in this country – the idea of sabbatical.

In my first paper to the Jim Joseph Foundation Board I mentioned the need for instituting a sabbatical program in passing. Lately, though, I have realized that a system of sabbatical -- of formalized renewal-- is critical if we are to be a thriving and vibrant community. Sabbatical programs have the ability to help us:

- Develop leadership that has both the capacity for creative thinking and the stamina to operationalize new ideas over the long haul;
- Build and encourage a new generation of leadership;
- Recognize the high price we ask of non-profit executives, headmasters, and teachers and truly value the people behind the great ideas; and
- Seek effective solutions to the complex and long-term challenges we face.

Some of the most creative companies already know the power of setting aside time for renewal. Every seven years, Stefan Sagmeister a designer in New York, closes his design studio for an entire year to give himself and his designers time for personal experimentation ([http://www.ted.com/talks/stefan\\_sagmeister\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_time\\_off.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/stefan_sagmeister_the_power_of_time_off.html)). They are free to pursue whatever they want, as long as it does not involve work for the office. In today's 24/7, always accessible, "you are only as good as your last project" world, this seems like an incredibly risky strategy – one that only a select few could pursue. But Sagmeister argues that he does not take the year off because his success allows him to do so. Rather, it is the other way around -- the year off fuels his success for the next seven years. Says, Sagmeister, "[The sabbatical] is clearly enjoyable for myself but probably even more important.... the work that comes out of this year, flows back into the company and into society at large." His ideas are more interesting, his work is once again a "calling," and

his company is more financially successful as a result. When asked how important the sabbatical was to “replenishing creativity,” Sagmeister replied: “On a scale of 1-10, 12.”

3M, a global innovation company, figured out this benefit in 1948. That was the year they instituted the “15 Percent Time Program” which allows their engineers to take off 15% of their paid time to pursue creative ventures. (Scotch tape and post-it notes were born this way.) Google’s 20% time program has led to the creation of Gmail and Google Earth.

The idea of sabbatical or formalized paid time off may seem to make sense for “creative” industries. However, what of the chronically under-resourced non-profit sector where it is hard to imagine organizations making due without key staff for an extended period of time?

In 2009, five foundations that provide sabbaticals to non-profit leaders commissioned *Creative Disruption*<sup>1</sup> – a study to look at the impact of sabbaticals on the non-profit sector. The five programs featured in the study were not all the same. They ranged in number of years of work required for participation -- from no minimum to over nine years (with most requiring the latter). And while most targeted executive directors, a few were open to other types of staff. Despite these differences, however, the programs shared three characteristics:

1. They were all created as a way to address “the stresses and demands of leadership (which) make intellectual, emotional, creative, and even physical burnout all too common among non-profit executives”;
2. They all required participants to take off between three to four consecutive months and strongly discouraged them from being in contact with their offices during this time; and
3. They all had a post-sabbatical reflection component to the program.

They also shared impressive results -- both for the individuals who participated and for their organizations. While many fear that a sabbatical will lead to leadership wanting to leave their position, the reality is that the overwhelming majority returned with a renewed commitment to their organization:

- 87% of participants reported greater confidence in their job – allowing them to focus on higher level work in policy, raise funds more effectively, and “think outside the box” more freely upon their return;
- 75% of leaders in the study reported being able to crystallize an existing vision for their organization or frame a new one;
- 82% reported improved work life balance and 64% better physical health; and
- 60% reported that his/her board of directors became more effective as a result of the planning and learning that surrounded the sabbatical process.

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<sup>1</sup> *Creative Disruption: Sabbaticals for Capacity Building and Leadership Development in the Non-Profit Sector*, Deborah S, Linnell and Tim Wolfred

These positive results also extended to those who served as interim directors, with the majority reporting increased responsibility and more shared decision making even after the senior leader's return. This outcome is especially important as we face the challenge of leadership transition and the concern over how to cultivate next generation of leadership. Sabbaticals enable second tier leadership to expand their skills and capacity. According to the report: "A sabbatical can act as a dry run for a future leadership transition. The experience can clarify what the [Executive Director's] responsibilities actually are – important information when looking for a successor. And interims can decide if the ED's job is really what they want."

While the benefits are great, the costs to operate such a program are not enormous. For each sabbatical participant, these foundations made grants of between \$25,000 and \$40,000 payable to the organization. These funds were used to partially cover the executive's salary while on leave, some travel expenses, a bonus for interim staff, and/or organizational development.

So what would a more formalized sabbatical program do to the field of Jewish education? What would it mean to give educators -- and others who work and impact young people -- the space to engage in their own ongoing education and exploration? What would be the impact on the community of leadership that is not overburdened and tired, but instead renewed, re-inspired, and open to new possibilities?

I caught a glimpse of this potential impact when, for the first time ever, I took a month off from work this summer. (Not quite enough time, but still...) After spending the first week running from yoga class to hike to yoga class all under the guise of relaxation, I finally realized that what I needed most was to slow down, to let my mind and body remember itself after years of multitasking and being perpetually plugged in. The impact on my work, my colleagues, and my own life has been quietly profound. I know that those who work for me can make good decisions without me being there and they now know that too. A work issue that I have been grappling with for a long time took on sudden clarity, and new ideas for the Foundation have begun to flow – accompanied by the energy to want to see them through.

I do not believe in magic bullets, but I do believe that our Tradition offers us glimpses of a path by which to maneuver through the challenges of modern life. Fields should not be plowed every year if we want them to continue to bear fruit. Neither should people. May this be the year that we find a way to provide real renewal for those who we rely upon to fulfill the sacred work of our community. May they be renewed for a good and sweet year and may we be renewed as a community in the process.