
Innovation and Beyond

Entrepreneurship, Intrapreneurship, and Systemic Change

Jonathan Woocher

By most measures, JESNA would be considered part of today's Jewish communal "establishment." It is one of nine national agencies that receive funding from local Jewish Federations through a consortium called the "Alliance." When the agency was created nearly 30 years ago as a result of a Federation-initiated study process, its very name—Jewish Education *Service* of North America—defined its intended role: to provide services to other institutions, especially local Federations and their central agencies for Jewish education. JESNA continues to operate largely as a "B to B" agency, helping local communities address their educational challenges by carrying out evaluations, consultations, and demonstration projects; convening conferences and other gatherings; and disseminating knowledge through publications and via the web.

Yet, despite its "establishment" status, JESNA is neither uninterested nor uninvolved in innovation. In a sense, JESNA was the establishment's response to a wave of educational innovation in the 1970s, epitomized by the creation of the Conference for Alternatives in Jewish Education (CAJE), innovation that its predecessor organization was perceived to have been unable to relate to or capitalize on. In fact, JESNA has compiled a respectable record as an innovator and nurturer of innovation in its own right. It led the thrust to make program evaluation normative as a tool for both accountability and improvement in Jewish education through its Berman Center for Research and Evaluation. It has given birth to programs like the Lainer Interns for Jewish Education, the first and still the largest program recruiting college students for careers in Jewish education, and WOW, a learner-focused, community-based initiative for redesigning supplementary Jewish education. It helped create the Covenant Foundation, Bikkurim, DeLet, and PELIE—each of which operated in its early days out of JESNA's offices with JESNA staff. JESNA initiated and co-convened the first national conference bringing together Jewish social entrepreneurs and other stakeholders in this arena. And one of its three program units, the Lippman Kanfer Institute, is an action-oriented think tank focused on innovation in Jewish learning and engagement.

JESNA is not alone in bridging the too facile distinction sometimes drawn between "establishment" and "innovative" organizations. For those who seek positive change in Jewish life today, the key question is not whether established organizations can be innovative and entrepreneurial. They can, though of course some innovate more often and more effectively than others. The key question is whether innovation from whatever sources—entrepreneurial start-ups or established agencies—will in fact lead to transformative changes in the overall condition of Jewish life. It is by now a truism, but no less true, that innovation per se

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(i.e., doing something new) is of modest value. Worthwhile innovations must be not only “new”; they must be “better”—that is, more effective in achieving valued outcomes than previous ways of doing things. And to be maximally valuable, innovations need to be “better” not only for a few beneficiaries but also on a large scale, or at least they must have the potential to be such with the right strategies and support for expansion and dissemination.

This is the standard that Bill Drayton has set with Ashoka, perhaps the pioneering organization for strengthening social entrepreneurship worldwide. Ashoka seeks in its Fellows and the projects they shepherd the potential, as they put it, not to give a man a fish, or even to teach him how to fish, but to change the fishing industry. To be sure, this is a very high bar indeed, and many smaller scale innovations have value even if they are not in and of themselves “game changers,” because an accumulation of smaller innovations can contribute to wider scale change. Nor should we expect or even desire that every innovative project or organization grows dramatically. What is important to take to scale is not necessarily the initiator of the innovation, but the innovation’s *impact*. Sometimes, this will be achieved by growing the innovating organization, but sometimes it can be achieved in other ways (e.g., by having the innovative idea or approach adopted widely by others).

Framing the question as one of maximizing the impact of innovations allows us to reconsider the roles of both so-called establishment and entrepreneurial organizations in the process of change. The backdrop for such a reconsideration is a Jewish landscape that is far from bleak, but is paradoxical: Enormous creative activity and achievement coexist today alongside wide swaths of inertia and indifference. Innovation in every sphere of Jewish life over the past decades has resulted in numerous micros successes—great programs, exciting new institutions, exemplary cultural products. Yet, major institutions—Federations, synagogues, JCCs, traditional service agencies—often find themselves struggling with uncertain missions and inadequate resources. Some have growing difficulty convincing both constituents and funders of their continuing relevance and effectiveness.

Meanwhile, large numbers of Jews claim that Jewish life, and especially that part of it associated with our most established institutions, carries little attraction or meaning for them. They are not hostile to Judaism or running away from their Jewishness, but neither are they deeply invested in them. They are waiting, waiting to see if somewhere among the vast array of Jewish organizations and programs there is one (or more) that can engage their interest and their passion. It is this reality that is calling for and calling forth innovative endeavors today. The question is whether these innovations will have impact on a large enough scale actually to transform the landscape, to shape a Jewish future in which large numbers of Jews (and some others)—not just small pockets of the most committed—believe that Jewish ideas, values, traditions, culture, relationships, institutions, and communities can contribute powerfully to their efforts to live meaningful, satisfying lives and to make a difference in the world.

What would it take for innovation to reshape contemporary Jewish life? Many things, of course, not least good ideas, dedicated and talented people, and money. But there are at least two critical areas where a new relationship between entrepreneurial and established organizations can play an important role in enhancing innovation’s impact: networking and capacity building. We know

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today that innovation is not, as our romantic imaginations may have had it, typically the product of lone geniuses locked away in a laboratory or a garage. Both in their genesis and especially in their spread, successful innovations are the product of networks of people and of knowledge flows between and among them (Hagel et al., 2010; Hargadon, 2003).

In the Jewish innovation ecosystem today, organizations that support Jewish social entrepreneurs—Bikkurim, Joshua Venture Group, Upstart Bay Area, PresenTense, Jumpstart, ROI, Slingshot, Makom Hadash, JHub, Paideia, and others—are helping foster such networking among these innovators, primarily in the early stages of their endeavors. But to achieve the full potential of the most promising innovations—to take them to the stage where they can have systemic impact—networking must extend into the broad landscape of established Jewish institutions as well. Only a small percentage of start-ups will be able to bring their innovations to scale as independent organizations. If we are to capitalize fully on the creative ideas that animate these start-ups, it will be by having other organizations learn from them and adopt and adapt these ideas in settings that the start-ups can rarely reach adequately on their own.

This is not an easy or automatic process. At least in the arena of Jewish education, it is difficult to imagine how even successful start-ups can achieve substantial impact without directly engaging the major networks of educational providers—something few can do on their own. Many leaders of entrepreneurial ventures are hard-pressed just to keep their initiatives and organizations going. They do not have the time or resources to build independent infrastructures for widespread dissemination of their innovations. Nor do they have the entrée or credibility to persuade on their own large numbers of existing institutions to adopt their approaches—even when those institutions might benefit enormously from doing so. Mediating institutions that can connect start-ups to appropriate potential implementation partners (a role that JESNA often plays, for example) can help accelerate the diffusion process and create new networks around shared concerns and visions. As one example, the New York Jewish Education Project is doing just this by fostering ongoing relationships involving both new programming and educator training between innovative educational organizations like Hazon, Storahelling, Avoda Arts, and Teva and synagogues in its network that are seeking to transform their educational programs and cultures.

At the same time as innovations are diffused, they can also be improved. Few “disruptive” innovations (to use Clayton Christensen’s term [1997])—those that offer genuinely new value propositions and reach new constituencies—emerge fully refined and perfected. By working with established organizations to bring these innovations to successively wider circles, entrepreneurs have the opportunity to learn from real-world experience and to add the “sustaining” innovations (the improvements in content and method) that help promote longer term success. (We should note, however, that innovations can also be distorted and watered down as they spread to new settings, resulting in disappointing outcomes and limited impact. Both the entrepreneurs and those aiding in the diffusion of their innovations need to be aware of this danger.)

The need to help entrepreneurs network more extensively is one element in the broader challenge of helping relatively new and small initiatives and organizations acquire the *capacity* to achieve their maximum potential impact. Although,

as we noted, not every new venture should grow and organizational growth is not the only or always the best way to achieve broad impact, the Jewish community would unquestionably benefit if many innovative endeavors that operate at a relatively small scale today were able to grow substantially. The Jewish innovation sector, having successfully produced a flow of new small-scale initiatives and entrepreneurs, is now beginning to face up to the fact that it often lacks an “act two”—a set of supports, financial and organizational, that will enable deserving new ventures to grow to realize their full potential impact and reach sustainability. There is no guarantee that established organizations themselves have the appropriate capacities in areas like leadership development, financial resource development, financial management, human resources, marketing, customer service, and a myriad of other areas vital to organizational as well as programmatic success—much less that they know how to share these capabilities. Nonetheless, some larger organizations clearly are in a position to help smaller ones acquire new capacities or, via a variety of arrangements, to collaborate with them to make these capabilities available to those that need them to grow.

Thus far, we have argued that established organizations need not and should not stand or be seen as standing outside the Jewish innovation ecosystem. Through their own intrapreneurship and through the assistance they can provide to entrepreneurial ventures, established organizations—if they have the vision and will—can add significantly to the sum total of impactful innovation taking place in Jewish life.

However, there is still a larger issue that needs to be addressed. If our goal is to achieve broad-scale change in how the Jewish community operates, will even well-supported innovations get us there? The past decade’s substantial number of entrepreneurial ventures have not (yet) demonstrated that they are capable of producing system-level changes in key arenas of Jewish life—education, spiritual community, social justice, human services. Yet, efforts at change from within established organizations—for example, the now two-decade-old attempt to transform congregational education—show no greater results. In both instances, what has been achieved thus far amounts to creating a set of examples of what *might* be—not a small achievement but hardly a widespread transformational change in any sector of Jewish life.

Might a more deliberate and encompassing alliance of entrepreneurial and (change-oriented) establishment forces produce a more rapid and effective pathway toward systemic change? The honest answer is: we don’t know. Some argue that the forces impeding change within established organizations are so formidable that any attempt to create such alliances would be self-defeating. This is not necessarily because of intent to impede, but because of the inherent power of inertia, existing value chains, and organizational regularities—this is the argument that Christensen (1997) makes for why established companies have such great difficulty producing disruptive innovations. Massive efforts are underway today to reform American education, but there are many voices claiming that working to change existing schools will never achieve the scope and scale of reform needed. Our only hope, they contend, is to create a parallel system of completely new schools, which is free to innovate radically, and to wait for the new models to eventually displace the old.

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Perhaps this is what needs to happen in American Jewish life as well. A new set of institutions—independent minyanim, educational programs that look nothing like schools, direct action social justice and environmental organizations—is growing up alongside the old and may in time replace many of them. The process of displacement and replacement will likely be uneven, but one could argue that such a process—and not an attempt to link the new and the old—represents our best hope for redrawing the landscape of Jewish life.

This is possible, but it is not the only possibility. Precisely because innovation does cut across Jewish organizations both new and established, and because realizing the full impact of innovation requires broad networks for idea generation and dissemination and the capacity to scale new models, the change process need not be one that pits the old against the new. Rather, large-scale change, the kind we need in Jewish life today, may emerge organically from many small-scale efforts pursued simultaneously and in loose coordination with one another under the banner of a large vision. This, a number of observers suggest, is how social change occurs today (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006; Hawken, 2007; Westley, Zimmerman, & Patton, 2006). Like the global environmental movement, a movement for change in Jewish life will not need a single leader or even a single strategy. Entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs can work in their respective settings, sometimes in parallel, sometimes intersecting in their efforts. Innovations will be put forward, tested, adopted, modified, and spread among those who see their value to enrich their own work. Some new organizations will grow rapidly and dramatically. Others will flower briefly and fade, but the ideas they championed will be taken up by others. Some older organizations will renew themselves and become part of the wave of innovation. Others will fail to do so or will fail to see the need to do so: They will wither. New alliances will be formed and new synergies discovered. As the movement finds its voice, there will be growing pressure for change even in those circles initially resistant (think Walmart and the “green” movement).

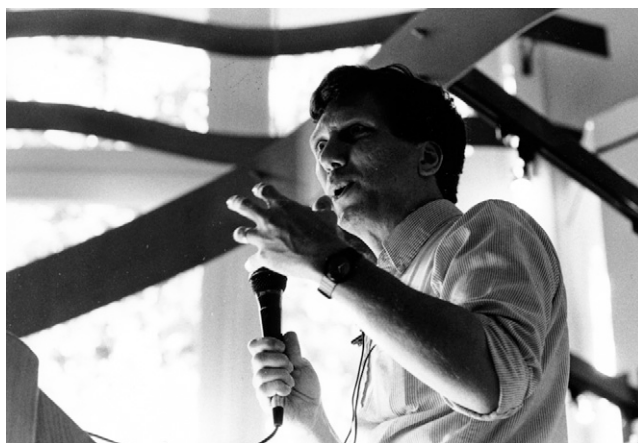
In truth, this is already happening in the Jewish world today. What marks the latest wave of innovation in Jewish life is that it is not “oppositional.” Unlike in the 1960s and 70s, today’s innovators are not “protesting” against the establishment. They are simply building what they believe is needed for Jewish life—their Jewish lives—to flourish. If they can resist the competitive pressures that come with the need for resources, they will build a culture far more collaborative than the one we have heretofore known. And those established organizations willing to play by the new rules will be welcomed and will benefit from doing so.

We have not yet found the language to articulate clearly the vision animating the many changes occurring today. But it is clear already that the current wave of innovative activity is not about placing a few new organizations on the Jewish map. It is about creating opportunities for Jewish living in the 21st century that are more diverse and inclusive; spiritually, intellectually, and aesthetically enriching; and morally compelling. This is work that can and must engage us all, innovators and disseminators, entrepreneurs and established organizations. We owe the Jewish past, present, and future no less.

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