

First: I am honored to share this exchange with William Rapfogel. There are few Jewish civil servants who have worked more tirelessly or more effectively over the years, and the work to which he has been so devoted is holy work, reaching out to the neediest among us.

I think it interesting that, without prior communication between us, we begin from the same place – to wit, an organization-specific appraisal. Rapfogel’s first paragraph succinctly states the obvious: organizations that specialize in work within the Jewish community should continue to do what they do, while those that focus on the general population should stay true to their mission. In Rapfogel’s words, “it would be terrible [for them] ... to withdraw their outreach efforts.’

Rapfogel goes on to present us with hard cases: We are ever dealing with scarce resources, and were the Met Council to provide a meal to a non-kosher client it would have to turn its back on a person who observes kashrut; were it to offer job counseling to all, it would be providing less services to those with special needs that arise from their religious conviction.

That makes sense to me, strikes me as entirely reasonable. Moreover, there are in fact some other agencies to which poor Jews can turn for the kind of assistance Rapfogel discusses. But in a sense, it avoids, perhaps even evades, a key question. When it comes to providing goods and services, we are particularly sensitive to the particular needs of Jews, needs that often arise from the very fact of their Judaism. But what are we to do when the question shifts from goods and services to dollars? How are we to advise the prospective philanthropist, or the UJA/Federation? Shall they, too, “retrench,” focus principally or even exclusively on observant Jews? In effect, Rapfogel says “yes”: “By targeting our specialized service toward the general community, people who have specialized needs may be losing out.” But to follow that advice might well starve others. Again, Rapfogel: “There are more food assistance options for those who don’t keep kosher than for those who do, which creates a risk in broadly serving everyone.” Well, yes – but. Those food assistance options are themselves hurting, hurting badly, these days, their clientele growing rapidly because of the recession, their contributions in jeopardy. They, too, need defense and protection.

As is almost always the case, the issue is one of priorities. And the answer, as is almost always the case, is in the title of this series: “Eilu V’Eilu.” Both/and. That is admittedly not a satisfactory formula. It articulates a disposition more than a strategy.

So let me conclude this part of our exchange by speaking of the disposition I know best – to wit, my own. I would be devastated were I urged, according to a doctrine of retrenchment, to cut my annual gift to Doctors Without Borders. I truly wish I could be still more generous than I am to this, an organization for which I have immense respect. But then comes my federation, and the day school my granddaughter attends, and the New Israel Fund, and the Religious Action Center, and on and on. I thought that this year, given the state of the economy, I might restrict my giving to service organizations, where the needs are so very pressing. But I could not say “no” to my local NPR station, to the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, and so on and so forth. In short, though it is messy, I can think of no other way than eilu v’eilu.

I am, as you may imagine, very curious regarding Rapfogel’s take on this dispositional conclusion.

The answer to this question really depends on an organization’s mission. Those organizations whose mission it is to care for those in the Jewish community—whether in the fields of education, outreach, human services and welfare or the arts—need to maintain their mission. For those organizations that already focus on the general population, it would be terrible to ignore their stated mandate and to withdraw their outreach efforts and services during this difficult time.

The first step, then, is for each organization to evaluate its mission as created by its founders and board members, keeping in mind past developments and evolutions, and to maintain that mission in the best possible fashion.

For Jewish organizations lacking a clear mandate, and for organizations considering branching out into the general community, the question demands real thought and understanding of the consequences. This also applies to funders, many of whom face this dilemma as they determine where to direct their donations.

I believe that Jewish organizations and funders who are in this situation should use this economic time to slow their outreach efforts and to dedicate their resources to helping those in the Jewish community.

This is for a few reasons:

- The Jewish community has specialized needs which require specialized services and cultural sensitivity.
- The Jewish community has fewer organizations focused solely on their needs (particularly in the area of human services.)
- Traditionally, Jewish philanthropists have turned their eyes to more general causes, leaving the Jewish community more vulnerable.

Here is one example from my organization, Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty: We operate the largest kosher food pantry in the country, distributing more than 4.5 million pounds of kosher food to more than 13,000 households each month, (This number increases before major Jewish holidays.) We proudly serve individuals in need regardless of their ethnicity or background, seeing it as our duty to help anyone in crisis.

However, when we distribute a food package to someone who doesn't keep kosher, we may prevent a person who does keep kosher from receiving that food package.

The same follows with job services. Many individuals in the Jewish community have special scheduling needs that can restrict the jobs open to them, including the need to leave early on Fridays and to take off for Jewish holidays. In addition, those from very traditional Jewish backgrounds may be lacking certain critical skills such as computer literacy and English language skills. And because of their hesitancy to seek help in a secular environment, their options are more limited than non-traditional Jews and non-Jews seeking help.

With these factors in mind, it is important to understand that retrenching may have its place in this devastating economy. Not because, G-d forbid, we negate the very real needs of those in our broader community, but because by staying true to mission and delivering targeted services

in the way we know best, our populations in need will recover more quickly and come out stronger.

Those organizations that already serve the general community must strengthen their services and offerings for all. But for those Jewish organizations considering expansion and outreach, now is not the time. The Jewish community is hurting too much.