

was no recognition of the different ways one can be committed to the Jewish community. This lack of recognition of Jewish diversity reflects the narrow and inward focus of many contemporary Jewish organizations.

Repeatedly, young Jewish women told me that they left their jobs at Jewish organizations because they found the environment “insular,” “parochial,” “conservative,” “irresponsible.” When asked what they want Jewish organizations to be, they said “relevant,” “progressive,” “pluralistic,” “responsive,” “engaged.” We in our 20’s and 30’s were raised in an era of unfounded prosperity for Jews, and our politics encompass a large community. We are concerned with the rights of prisoners, sweatshop laborers, and unions. We are worried about the homeless, about domestic violence and rape, about gun control, about hate crime legislation. We are agitating for the rights of women in Afghanistan and for political prisoners around the world. We want to be able to do this work through the Jewish community because it is, at least in part, our Jewish values that inform our concern. Is there no place for this activist work within the agendas of Jewish organizations?

For the first 18 years of my life I felt alienated from everything Jewish. In college I discovered a Jewish community that was progressive, activist, pluralist and engaged. I wanted to continue to be a part of that community so I sought out a job in the Jewish community. But until the day that Jewish organizations value young women’s ideas, compensate us appropriately, treat us like adults, mentor us, and recognize in us the potential future leaders of our community, young women professionals like me will continue to flee. Non-Jewish organizations will reap the benefits of a hard-working, bright cadre of young Jewish women, and the Jewish community will permanently lose a valuable resource.

## CHANGING THE COMMUNAL AGENDA

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Recently, The Trust for Jewish Philanthropy announced that it was funding its first initiative, *Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community*. The goals of *Advancing Women* are ambitious: we plan to shatter the glass ceiling in Jewish organizational life.

The Trust, a new public charity founded by the United Jewish Communities in January 2000, is establishing new models of venture philanthropy within the organized Jewish community. After embarking on a nation-wide “listening tour” to identify Jewish communal needs and to explore the possibility of meeting these needs through new partnerships, *Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community* was the first project to be chosen by The Trust.

We were congratulated on the outstanding achievement of being selected from among dozens of projects, particularly since, as a number of people commented, “surely there are so many more important communal problems to resolve.” We responded by pointing out that the tough issues that our community must tackle require that we put first-rate professionals in place who are capable of taking on these challenges successfully.

For a community facing a crisis in personnel, framing our commitment to advance women as a talent recruitment strategy was convincing to many who then became enthusiastic about the project. Embedded in this pragmatic business case is our conviction that when we succeed in leveling the playing field, we will transform Jewish institutions into more equitable, fulfilling and productive work environments for all professionals.

This major undertaking grew out of a plan that was started more than eight years ago, when Ma’yan was just preparing to open its doors. Nessa Rapoport suggested to the founders, Barbara Dobkin and Eve Landau, that they commission research that would give the community an

accurate picture of the standing of women in Jewish organizational life. The report that was published in 1998, based on research conducted by Dr. Bethamie Horowitz, Dr. Pearl Beck and Dr. Charles Kadushin, focused on the role of women on the boards of major national Jewish organizations.

Those who helped guide the project were not surprised by the researchers' documentation of the tangible gender gap between men and women on these national boards, and the strikingly small number of women who held top volunteer or professional posts. However, Ma'yan staff and volunteers were taken aback by the complacent reaction of many top lay leaders and executives to the findings.

In a series of meetings with Executive Directors of these organizations that I attended in my role as consultant to the project, with Ma'yan Director Eve Landau, we were assured that as women continue to make strides in the private sector, government and the general not-for-profit field, the imbalance in the Jewish world would gradually correct itself. The increasing numbers of women rabbis — which now account for 50% of every non-Orthodox seminary program — seemed to make a number of organizational executives even more confident in their assertion that little action was needed to be taken to remedy the situation.

Ma'yan decided to initiate a long-term systemic effort to challenge these assumptions, and to build support for initiatives that would advance women in the organized Jewish community. The responsibility to develop and implement the plan was given to me and my business partner in change management work, Jonathan Jacoby.

Our strategy has been multi-faceted: we have developed a network of women who are deeply involved in the organized Jewish community and are committed to the full participation of women in the community's leadership. Through consultations with hundreds of individuals and small groups, we have begun to shift the issue of women's advancement from the margins to the mainstream. This has been a difficult task, because we have found that ethnic and organizational loyalty often trumps gender. As a result, women — even those expressly concerned about women's role — find that when they advocate this position, it may diminish their status within their own organizations. The primary commitment of

women board members often is directed to the organization on whose board they sit; that is why they have become leaders within that organization. Creating an effective way to work for gender equity within that setting, without compromising their position, is often a delicate balancing act.

To test some strategies about various ways to help organizations strengthen women's leadership and involvement, we have been working directly with two institutions, a national organization and a local Federation. The insights that we gain from these pilot programs will inform our efforts to create a technical assistance outreach program that can be used by organizations across the country.

In addition to these aspects of the project, we have set our sights on forging a new consensus about the realities of gender inequality among the leadership of the organized Jewish community. Speaking at public conferences to audiences of both women and men — at the Jewish Funders Network, Leadership 2000, the national teleconference of the Jewish Communal Service Association, and the Rabbinical Assembly — has allowed us to reach decision makers, both men and women.

We have used these forums to educate the Jewish public about the urgency of creating opportunities for women to participate equally in the leadership of our community. While emphasizing the talent drain that we are experiencing as a result of the loss of women's involvement, we have also focused on the chance to make use of initiatives to advance women as a laboratory that will develop new ideas to improve the overall quality of Jewish organizational life.

This intersection — between the issue of women's advancement and Jewish communal transformation — has become increasingly significant over the years. When we survey the Jewish communal landscape, our institutions have a powerful history of tremendous impact. These Jewish organizations have accomplished virtual miracles from the building of the State of Israel to the rescuing of Jews in peril from Ethiopia to the Former Soviet Union. From community centers to synagogues, museums to day schools, university centers to religious seminaries, social service agencies to organizations for research, advocacy and public policy: the extraordinary network of organizations that we have established touches on almost every aspect of our identities and our lives.

On the other hand, as you can read in the pages of Rebecca Metzger's article (see page 28), her sojourn in the heart of the Jewish organizational world uncovered deep problems within the system. When her journey began, this young woman was filled with passion and commitment; by the end, she left the Jewish organized world not just in sorrow, but also in anger.

Lots of people are fleeing; many more aren't even joining. Others stay, but are often disheartened. More and more, committed Jews are openly wondering why they should accept the hierarchy, bureaucracy, insularity, and lack of innovation that seems to characterize so many Jewish organizations. Like Rebecca, many feel their voices are unheard, even at meetings where the topic is the need to reach out to the young people like them.

Would women CEOs function differently? Certainly, all women do not lead in a collaborative, inclusive way. But all women know firsthand the difficulty of being heard. Every woman I have interviewed, including many high-powered leaders, reports the frustration of having her ideas credited to someone else, most often a man, in the course of a meeting. These experiences may, in fact, influence many women to create contexts for consultation and involvement across hierarchical boundaries.

Advancing women to leadership posts in the Jewish world requires that we structure leadership opportunities that are vital and viable. When we surveyed women board members, some were striving to achieve greater leadership roles in the major organizations in the Jewish community; others adamantly preferred to focus their involvement on local and/or general organizations. These women were skeptical of their potential to influence the calcified patterns of leadership and institutional norms, and spoke of the need to find real opportunities for substantial impact and results.

The Jewish community can respond to these critiques by deciding to change its organizational culture and its infrastructure. The community is capable of becoming a central address for innovation and experimentation; and by expanding its vision, the community will expand the leadership talent pool.

The choice is ours. If we persuade our institutions to revitalize themselves and to shape a more compelling agenda, we will engage women, young people, artists, academicians, those with intellectual capital willing to provide the human capital of commitment and hard work.

In designing the best ways to include and advance more talented women, we will create a prototype for recruiting the next generation of leaders. We need to identify and cultivate these new voices and visions. These organizations that frustrate us also need us; the generations who preceded us have done the hard work of establishing a solid infrastructure that has good will, a good name, cash and clout. It needs renovation, re-envisioning, reforming and transforming.

As a catalyst for change, Ma'yan has made significant strides in inserting women's concerns onto the Jewish communal agenda. Now we need to play an even more assertive role, and actively transform our community's agenda. Sounds like a great and important job for great and important women.

