

# SEEDING the ECOSYSTEM of the JEWISH FUTURE

by FELICIA HERMAN and SHAWN LANDRES

What do LexisNexis, FedEx, Microsoft, CNN and MTV Networks have in common? Not only have they fundamentally changed the way we think about information retrieval, shipping, technology, newsgathering and music, but each was founded during a recession. Instead of finding cheaper, familiar ways to solve old problems, each challenged the assumptions and conventions underlying its respective market, pioneered new ways of doing business, and succeeded in changing the face of American industry.

We believe that the current financial crisis confronts American Jewry with just such a choice. We can retrench around the familiar, retool existing programs and reduce wasteful spending around the edges. Or we can harness this painful moment of constriction to generate the social, economic and political will to build a new Jewish future; to use this profound moment of discontinuity to acknowledge our current organizational weaknesses; and to lay the groundwork for a Jewish communal infrastructure that will sustain the community for the coming decades.

The first step is to discard our vestigial allegiances to outmoded Jewish organizations and to missions that have already been accomplished. We cannot afford to sustain organizations that we have been hanging on to because of nostalgia, fears born of bygone eras of Jewish history or outmoded analyses of the challenges facing the Jewish people. The organized Jewish community of the 20th Century served the needs of a minority culture intent on proving itself to a majority that was at best indifferent and at worst hostile. The times and the culture called for large bureaucratic institutions to serve individuals en masse, and Jewish organizations emerged that fit the demands and frameworks of the time. This was a 20th Century infrastructure in both content and form — it was centralized, bureaucratic and hierarchical, and it addressed the specific challenges of the times through proprietary strate-

gies developed by professionals.

The content and form of Jewish life in the 21st Century are quite different, however, and Jewish leaders and funders can no longer fail to acknowledge or to understand this transformation.

Many people already understand the content part of this equation. “Renaissance and renewal” has replaced “rescue and relief” in the community’s lexicon. Rather than demonstrate that Jews are like everybody else, we need to demonstrate Judaism’s unique value in a voluntary society. We need organizations that reach contemporary individuals in meaningful, authentic ways and that can discover and populate new points of intersection between contemporary America and Jewish life.

But only a prescient few have understood the other side of this equation: that the form of Jewish organizational life will also be different in the 21st Century. The paradigm-shifting internet revolution has challenged every convention about how people communicate, organize and act as individuals and collectives. Simply put, thanks to the internet, everything is available and most of it is free. There are virtually no barriers to organizing groups around any interest, no matter how narrow, or across any demographic or geographic boundary. Anyone with an internet connection has full access to the information needed to become the producer, broker and consumer of his/her own Jewish life.

This shift profoundly affects the ways that individuals access and engage with Jewish life, and thus it bears profound implications for Jewish organizations and for the organizational infrastructure as a whole. The vertical institutions of the 20th Century, led by professional insiders, are giving way to new horizontal structures — distributed networks populated by multiple organizations that operate simultaneously and autonomously, and that communicate and share information with their audiences and between their organizations in ways previously unimaginable. These new groups do not seek exclusive allegiances with their participants; they understand that people today connect to Jewish life in multiple and episodic ways over the course of their lives (or their days). They also integrate an awareness of the abundance and radical connectivity offered by new technologies.

We see the contours of the Jewish future emerging in the host of Jewish organizations that have been created in the past decade. Inspired by the entrepreneurship economy of the late 20th and early 21st Centuries, enabled by tectonic shifts in technology, and supported by a range of venture philanthropists who operate outside of traditional Jewish giving structures, American Jews — especially young Jews — are building and inhabiting a new Jewish ecosystem that resonates with their value systems and worldviews. In most cases, this system organically incorporates an understanding of the new organizational modes created by the internet. This new sector has steadily built momentum, demand and capacity over the past decade.

Our organizations, The Natan Fund and Jumpstart, recently partnered with The Samuel Bronfman Foundation to begin to analyze these organizations in the aggregate. The resulting report, *The Innovation Ecosystem: Emergence of a New Jewish Landscape*, makes clear that we no longer can afford to ignore or dismiss new Jewish organizations as ephemeral, marginal or as luxuries. These startups represent a \$100 million annual economy engaging over 400,000 people per year. Their audiences are diverse, reaching all ages and levels of Jewish involvement, including segments that traditional organizations have struggled to reach, such as people in their 20s and 30s. In 2008, this innovation ecosystem reached more than 100,000 people who had no other meaningful connection to the organized Jewish community. (The report, and the organizations invited to participate, can be found at [jewishjumpstart.org](http://jewishjumpstart.org).)

The report also demonstrates that new organizations are at great risk in this crisis. Without financial safety nets or reliable sources of income (few of the newer organizations have cash reserves, endowments, national brand names or diverse bases of long-time supporters) and without organizational fat that can be trimmed in lean years, these organizations must respond to a serious financial crisis by cutting off their limbs. Such amputations cripple both the individual organizations and the Jewish community as a whole. Retrenching in this sector can mean decimation, and the Jewish community cannot afford such a deep loss.

Our hope, our plea, is that the Jewish community realizes that these organizations are a bellwether of the Jewish future, presaging both the content and form that will define 21st Century Jewry. Funders, communal leaders and existing organizations must take a clearheaded look at the current organizational landscape and invest strategically in the Jewish future. Thoughtful, creative, courageous leaders must use this crisis as an opportunity to help the Jewish community get out in front of, or at least keep pace with, the cultural transformations that will radically reshape Jewish life in the years to come. ■

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