

REENGINEERING THE JEWISH ORGANIZATION

The Transformation of Hillel, 1988-2000

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(Reprinted from the Journal of Jewish Communal Service, Summer 2000)



Hillel

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The appointment of a new chief executive officer in 1988 and the communal reaction to the 1990 national Jewish Population Survey laid the groundwork for the renaissance of Hillel in the 1990s. This article describes how Hillel moved from near the bottom of the Jewish communal food chain to near the top in little more than a decade, drawing implications for the revitalization of Jewish organizational life.

A recent article in the *Detroit Jewish News* described Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life as “the gem of Jewish organizational life.” A Jewish Telegraphic Agency feature story reported that “Hillel has been undergoing an internal and revitalizing change.” An article in the *Hartford Courant* observed that “Hillel is enjoying a dynamic renewal on campuses all over North America.” An essay in the 1999 *American Jewish Year Book* characterized Hillel as “a dramatic counterpoint to the relatively anemic condition of contemporary Jewish youth movements.” Other recent articles have pointed to Hillel’s success in attracting the support of wealthy, influential donors; increasing student participation; expanding into the former Soviet Union; helping stimulate the renaissance agenda of Jewish federations; opening or planning more than two dozen new and renovated Hillel facilities; and modeling Jewish pluralism.

Such praise in the Jewish and mainstream media would have been unlikely a generation ago. The B’nai B’rith Hillel Foundations, the corporate precursor to Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, suffered from both a poor self-image and a poor public image. Hillel had a largely undeserved reputation as a place where rabbis unsuited for the rigors and undeserving of the emoluments of congregational life found gainful employment. Viewed as ineffective and inconsequential,

Hillels were often dismissed for serving both too few students and too many of the wrong kind, the proverbial “Jewish geeks and nerds,” who were unable to fit in and find a place within the larger campus community. Even the organizational name “Hillel” became a questionable symbol in Jewish life and a potential impediment to revitalizing the organization. In fact, several Jewish federations in the 1980s discussed creating alternative Jewish campus organizations and jettisoning the name and national affiliation. A few did.

How did Hillel go from near the bottom of the Jewish communal food chain to near the top in little more than a decade? What lessons can be drawn from this by other Jewish organizations? What implications does Hillel’s revitalization have for the revitalization of Jewish life around the world?

CHANGING TIMES

The stereotypes were largely wrong. Hillel was never as ineffective as its detractors claimed.

Founded in 1923 by William Chauncy Baldwin, a Congregationalist minister at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, and led by gifted and charismatic rabbis and educators, such as Ben Frankel, Abram Sachar and others, Hillel emerged as a classic campus ministry during its formative decades. In 1925, B’nai B’rith assumed the task of building the national Hillel movement following an unsuccessful overture to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (Reform).

B’nai B’rith was well positioned to grow the campus organization. The oldest and largest

Jay L. Rubin joined the staff of Hillel in 1997 following 16 years as a federation executive and four years teaching history at the college level.

Jewish service organization in the United States, B'nai B'rith had grassroots support, deep pockets for the time, a strong interest in Jewish youth, and a multi-denominational Jewish orientation. The B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundations hired rabbis to provide critical spiritual, cultural, educational, and social services to Jewish campus communities throughout the United States. Local B'nai B'rith lodges undertook efforts to provide Hillel Houses on or near campus. Hillel served as "the synagogue on campus," a place where Jewish students could celebrate Shabbat and other Jewish holidays, gain access to kosher food and pastoral counseling, participate in informal Jewish learning opportunities before Jewish studies programs proliferated on campus, and socialize with other Jews. In an era when young people typically married in their early twenties, Hillel played a significant role in Jewish dating and courtship. On residential campuses, especially, Hillel offered a "home away from home" and a refuge to Jewish students in a largely gentile environment.

Before the 1960s, Jewish college students faced very different internal and external worlds. First, they were more connected Jewishly. Their parents or grandparents were likely to have immigrated to the United States from the centers of Jewish life in Europe. Living in or near urban Jewish communities, they shared a working familiarity, if not a complete understanding, of Jewish ritual, language, and culture. Inter-marriage rates were low. Affiliation rates were high. Second, anti-Semitism reinforced group identity and limited other outlets and options. Admission quotas held down the number and percentage of Jews on many campuses. Fraternities, sororities, honor societies and other organizations openly or tacitly restricted their membership to white Christians. Hillel offered no such barriers to leadership, involvement or socialization as the number of Jewish college students grew as a result of the GI Bill and the entry of more and more Jewish families into the middle class.

And then came the 1960s. The social changes of the 1960s had an immense impact on Jewish life and Jewish life on campus. Jewish men and women were major beneficiaries of the civil rights revolution as barriers fell and new opportunities arose. The melting pot succeeded to an unprecedented degree as Jews increasingly participated in every aspect of campus life. Jewish students

also disproportionately embraced (and in many cases led) the culture wars of the 1960s, with their concomitant intergenerational conflict, sexual freedom, drug use, radical politics, and anti-institutional bias. Like other campus ministries, Hillel struggled to respond to the challenges of a new era and to be taken seriously in an age of diminished support for organized religious life. Although a number of individual Hillels and Hillel directors rose to the challenge and planted the seeds of organizational transformation, the movement as a whole became marginalized, maligned, and factionalized through the next two decades.

The social upheavals of the 1960s also affected B'nai B'rith, the parent organization as fraternal organizations lost their primacy in American life. Financial cutbacks by B'nai B'rith exacerbated Hillel's problems. Hillel lacked the ability to expand to new campuses with large Jewish enrollments; to attract, develop, retain, and support sufficient numbers of quality Jewish professionals; and to operate a national infrastructure to ensure quality, develop financial resources, and revitalize the organization. Management and labor in the form of the "national office" and the "field" were often at odds. Jewish federations began to play an increasingly important role in the governance and funding of local and regional Hillels, though they contributed little to a national vision. By 1988, Hillel as a national Jewish movement faced an uncertain future at best, and, at worst, no future at all.

CHANGING PARADIGMS

Two seminal events lay the groundwork for the renaissance at Hillel in the 1990s: the appointment of Richard M. Joel as the new chief executive officer in 1988 and the reaction to the National Jewish Population Survey sponsored by the then Council of Jewish Federations (CJF) in 1990.

The decision of a B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundations' search committee to recommend the hiring of Richard M. Joel symbolized the desperate condition of the organization. One observer characterized the move as the Jewish equivalent of a "Hail Mary Pass." Joel, 37, was not a rabbi, in an organization historically identified with the rabbinate. He was a Modern Orthodox Jew in an organization desperate to attract non-orthodox and unaffiliated Jews. He had no prior involvement

with Hillel, having attended New York University as both an undergraduate and law school student. (NYU did not have a Hillel until the founding of the Edgar Bronfman Center for Jewish Student Life in 1996.) He had worked as a prosecuting attorney in the Bronx and as associate dean and professor at the Cardozo School of Law of Yeshiva University.

B'nai B'rith leaders looked beyond the resume in selecting Joel. Joel had passion, charisma and extraordinary communication and interpersonal skills. He spoke knowledgeably and honestly about the search for meaning by Jewish young adults, including his own willingness to invest professionally in the Jewish people. He had a solid Jewish education and extensive experience working with young adults in a variety of settings. He had managerial, supervisory and administrative experience. He articulated a vision of a revitalized Hillel able "to provoke" a Jewish renaissance in America.

As an outsider, Joel could see aspects of Hillel less visible to organization insiders. "We thought Hillel needed a tune-up," Rabbi William Rudolph, former Associate International Director recalled. "Richard knew it needed an overhaul."

Several significant paradigm shifts informed Joel's vision. Hillel could no longer look primarily to the synagogue as a model for Jewish life on campus. A distinct and sacred community organization model offered the best construct for shaping a pluralistic campus community. Hillel required a diverse corps of Jewish professionals from a variety of disciplines to transform the organization. Rabbinic ordination, while a powerful plus, could no longer serve as the *sine qua non* to Hillel employment.

Hillel also had to evolve from a student membership club with dues and officers into a community infrastructure supporting a wide range of different Jewish interest groups and organizations. Joel championed a "participation" model of community, rather than the more traditional "affiliation" model. He believed passionately in student empowerment and in the need for Hillel programming to reflect the great diversity of Jewish student interests and backgrounds. Hillels had to become less building-centered and instead connect with Jewish students in residence halls, student unions, fraternity and

sorority houses, and other campus and community settings.

To succeed, Hillels had to adapt fully to the different worlds of the university, the Jewish community, and American society as a whole and to embrace fully the best practices of each. From the university world, Joel championed the concept of accreditation, non-resident trustee boards, and alumni giving. From the Jewish world, he advocated lay leadership development, partner agency relations, and a global agenda. Hillel could benefit from modern business practices as well. Joel characterized Hillel as a franchise where the individual franchisees had to maintain minimum standards and accountability to the franchise owner. In turn, the global infrastructure had no greater purpose than to enable the success of individual Hillels.

Joel also placed a high premium on Jewish pluralism. Distressed by the increasing conflict between large segments of the Orthodox and non-Orthodox communities in the United States and Israel, Joel articulated a vision of Hillel as a laboratory of the Jewish people. Opposed to homogenizing differences in Jewish belief and practice, he celebrated Jewish diversity and invited each Jewish movement to achieve full participation in the Hillel world.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

To advance implementation of the new paradigms, Joel had to gain authority over a Balkanized and suspicious Hillel system and deliver tangible financial and human resources.

An immense challenge involved gaining credibility with key members of the *vatikim*, Hillel's senior professionals in the field. Rudolph, a longtime and esteemed Hillel professional, played an instrumental role in lending Joel initial credibility. A handful of other senior professionals, including Rabbi James Diamond of Washington University and Rabbi Jeffrey Summit of Tufts University, extended early offers of support. Joel also recruited David Raphael, a strong Hillel professional from Temple University in Philadelphia, to work at his side. In addition, he utilized every one of his people skills to alternately strong-arm and finesse. "I have an airplane," he told an early and difficult meeting of Hillel regional directors. "I'm on

the runway and I'm going to get on the airplane and take off. I want all of you to come with me, and there's room on this airplane for all of you. There's only one problem: this airplane doesn't have a baggage compartment, so if you're going to insist on holding onto your baggage, you have to stay behind."

From the start, Joel followed three cardinal principles to guide him in leading Hillel. First, he maintained the need to keep all eyes "focused on the prize." In the earliest stages of Hillel's transformation, Joel impressed upon his colleagues the need to look ahead, to think big, and to have lofty aspirations. He insisted that they not allow past problems or current obstacles to discourage them or to divert their attention from the task at hand.

Second, Joel defined leadership as vision plus an implementation strategy. Less than a half year into his term, Joel, with input and insights from some key Hillel professionals, developed a blueprint for the new organization. Hillel had to become the foundation for the campus Jewish community. Hand in hand with this notion, the vision statement identified two distinct directions for the national organization: to provide direct service to the field and to lead a national movement for the benefit of the Jewish world.

Third, Joel believed in the power of linguistic and cultural change. He sparked the development of a new Hillel lexicon. He replaced the old Hillel emblem of traditional symbols with the word Hillel shaped like a flame. He changed the name of the national office into the International Center to convey a new service delivery orientation and an active and vibrant resource for local Hillels. He eliminated the old mission statement, "Devoted to Religious, Cultural and Counseling Activities Among Jewish Students at College and Universities," and evolved a new mission statement "Maximizing the Number of Jews Doing Jewish With Other Jews." He retooled conferences for different Hillel constituencies to increase communication and buy-in: transforming the Director's Conference into a full Professional Staff Conference, and further developing the Student Leaders Assembly and the Lay Leadership Conference. The Leaders Assembly, in particular, served as a veritable fifth column in advancing the new culture of student empowerment. Student leaders returned to their Hillels from a late summer in

the Poconos as energized and informed agents of change.

Without bread there can be no Torah. Without adequate financial resources the new vision of Hillel would never have been implemented. The financial problems of B'nai B'rith cast a giant shadow on Hillel. B'nai B'rith provided \$4 million of the Hillel system's \$16 million annual budget. Half the money supported the work of the International Center; the other half provided annual allocations to the field. The swift decline in financial support from B'nai B'rith forced Hillel's International Center into a triage mode of reducing or eliminating financial support to a number of Hillels. In 1993, B'nai B'rith put Hillel on notice of potentially catastrophic cuts ahead.

By then, Joel had developed a kitchen cabinet of dedicated lay leaders. B'nai B'rith had supplied David L. Bittker, a Detroit business executive with strong ties to both the Jewish Federation and B'nai B'rith worlds. Rabbi Herbert Friedman, President of the Wexner Heritage Foundation, had opened up the vast alumni riches of his organization to Hillel after a powerful encounter with Joel. Paul Cherner of Chicago, Louis Berlin of Miami, and Neil Moss of Columbus joined Hillel's inner circle from Wexner. Early lay partners also included Barry Levin of Philadelphia, Chuck Newman of Ann Arbor, Ellie Meyerhoff Katz of South Florida, Michael Rukin of Boston and others.

The new inner circle developed a three-pronged strategy to address the funding crisis. Hillel needed to increase support from both Jewish federations and Jewish philanthropists. B'nai B'rith ownership of Hillel had become an obstacle to developing closer relationships with each. Hillel needed to become independent.

David Bittker spearheaded the successful effort of Hillel to become an independent non-profit organization in 1994. The friendly spin-off clearly met the needs of both organizations. B'nai B'rith faced a massive restructuring effort of its own and could neither save Hillel nor survive the demise of this core service. For its part, Hillel could not successfully engage new funding sources as long as ultimate decision-making authority lay with the leadership of B'nai B'rith. Aided by B'nai B'rith International President Kent Schiner and Executive Vice President Sidney Clearfield, Hillel departed with the parent

organization's blessings and support. B'nai B'rith provided Hillel with a floor of free office space in their Washington, D.C. headquarters, as well as other in-kind services and limited financial support. B'nai B'rith received eight seats on Hillel's Board of Directors and the continuing ability to identify campus services as part of its historic mission.

NEW PHILANTHROPY

Joel addressed the key area of philanthropic support as his personal mission. Hillel would need the involvement of significant donors to both actualize the new vision and gain credibility with local Hillels and Jewish Federations. Two early grants provided a major boost to the organization. A \$1 million gift from Jacob Burns, a former board chair of the Cardozo School of Law, provided a fund to promote serious programs on ethical issues. A \$500,000 gift from Irving and Sarah Pitt of Detroit, obtained with the assistance of Nathan Rubenstein, provided a source for creative, student-initiated program grants at campuses worldwide.

In cementing the involvement of Edgar M. Bronfman, Joel boosted the prospects of the organization immeasurably. Chairman of the Board of the Seagram Corporation and President of the World Jewish Congress, Bronfman provided an inestimable boost to Hillel. He offered leadership, CEO savvy, philanthropic support, and a shared vision of Jewish renaissance provoked by a new generation. In Joel, Bronfman had found a bridge to connect him more strongly than ever to Jewish young adults.

Bronfman created Hillel's International Board of Governors, an advisory body of major philanthropists committed to Jewish renaissance and contributing a minimum of \$50,000 per year in unrestricted support to Hillel's International Center. He opened doors, hosted events, and spearheaded a national direct-mail fundraising effort. Bronfman and Joel also visited more than 50 campuses since 1994 to meet with students, university officials, and community leaders. Each visit had an incalculable impact on the image, credibility and support of local Hillels.

Other Jewish philanthropists attracted to Joel's vision, passion and honesty joined Bronfman on the International Board of Governors. A significant number emulated his activism in related areas. Michael and Judy

Steinhardt launched the Jewish Campus Service Corps in 1994, a cadre of recent college graduates who engage a broad spectrum of Jewish students. The Steinhardts also used Hillel to test the emerging Birthright Israel methodology with inexpensive, campus-based trips for first timers. In 1994, Charles and Lynn Schusterman of Tulsa, Oklahoma brought Hillel to the former Soviet Union to help young adults reclaim a heritage denied to them for more than 75 years. The Schusterman Family Foundation also played a major role in leadership development among Hillel's three primary constituencies by sponsoring high-level annual conferences for students, professionals, and lay leaders. Leonard and Randall Kaplan of Greenboro, North Carolina, established a new culture of recruitment at Hillel, designed to place Jewish career options before thousands of additional university students and other professionals. Ellie Meyerhoff Katz linked her family's devotion to education and culture to the establishment of Hillel's Joseph Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Learning. Others championed student activism, launched new Hillels, or spearheaded capital projects on one or more campuses.

NEW PARTNERSHIPS

The third element in implementing the vision involved repositioning Hillel within the Jewish federation movement. Michael Rukin, a Hillel activist and federation lay leader from Boston, engineered the major advance on this front.

The findings of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) had stunned the Jewish world. The report showed rising intermarriage rates and decreasing levels of affiliation and practice. Jewish continuity could no longer be taken for granted by focusing communal energies largely on the issues of Israel, anti-Semitism, human services and social action in the absence of Jewish learning, content and values. The NJPS implicitly positioned Jewish college students as a critical, underserved and at-risk population and Hillel as an undervalued asset in addressing the challenge. Hillel seized the opportunity to make the connection explicit by issuing a follow-up report and analysis of the population study authored by Seymour Martin Lipset, a distinguished sociologist and Hillel activist. Rukin pushed to institutionalize the connection by prodding the Council of Jewish

Federations to establish a campus services task force.

The CJF Task Force on Jewish University Student Services gathered data and testimony in 1993 before issuing a series of recommendations in a January 1994 publication entitled “New Visions for Serving Jewish University Students.” The Task Force included lay leaders, professionals, academicians, and students. The new vision included a goal of significantly increased federation funding for campus activities through a nationwide fair-share program and endorsed Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life as the central federation agency through which campus services are delivered. The report also advocated increasing the opportunities for student participation on a local and national level and replacing diminished B’nai B’rith support of Hillel with emergency funding from federations.

Rukin immediately convened a new committee to draft specific funding formulas. Approved by the CJF Board in 1995, the “Report of the Working Group on Funding Jewish University Student Services” (JUSS) recognized the campus as “a key gateway opportunity for strengthening Jewish identity” and reaffirmed Hillel as “the central federation agency through which campus services are delivered.” In response to the historic underfunding of campus services by the federation system and the dramatic decline in funding by B’nai B’rith, the JUSS Initiative achieved the following:

- created model Hillel budgets by campus Jewish population size
- adopted a goal of doubling the funding for Jewish campus services to \$50 million (in 1994 dollars) by FY 2002
- established a collective responsibility formula, assigning 40 percent of the local, regional, and national Hillel budget to the federation system
- proposed 14 regional consortia to encourage compliance with the agreement and to increase federation involvement with Hillels in contiguous geographic areas

Hillel benefited from the new partnership with Jewish federations in several ways. The federations now assumed a significant portion of the former B’nai B’rith funding. The federation movement received nearly 20 seats on the FJCL Board. In addition, the

International Center could advocate for federation support of local Hillels by using the CJF recommendations.

Geographic issues had a key impact on federation funding, as Jewish federations tended to serve agencies in core metropolitan areas where donors lived and worked. College campuses, on the other hand, were often located outside major Jewish population centers, for historic and political reasons. The JUSS Initiative, at least, offered a framework for broadening traditional service areas.

Hillel also benefited from formal recognition as the central federation agency on the campus. Hillel could partner with scores of other organizations interested in working with and for college students from a position of strength without in any way jeopardizing the hard won franchise of campus services.

Although the signs of Hillel’s transformation are everywhere, the turnaround is still fragile and very much a work in progress. The human and financial resources do not yet exist to reach thousands of additional college students. New Hillels are waiting to emerge at a number of post- World War II public universities with large Jewish student populations. The majority of Hillels remain undercapitalized and understaffed. Hillel has a very small endowment fund and is extremely dependent on large contributions from a small number of generous and deeply committed donors.

The dramatic rebirth of Hillel though offers a number of clear lessons for other Jewish organizations in a re-engineering mode.

- Charismatic, visionary and strong professional leadership is an essential ingredient in Jewish organizational transformation as is substantive, honest and healthy lay-professional partnership.
- Organization transformation requires a vital mission and a viable constituency. Nostalgia is not enough.
- Change must come rapidly even as organizational transformation is incomplete. Process and consensus must subordinate to leadership and vision.
- Jewish organizational cultures must adapt to major social change with new paradigms, relationships and language.
- Organizational transformation cannot happen at the national or international level without also happening on a local level “at the grassroots.” Hillel invested in both strengthening the International

- Center and transforming Jewish life on campus.
- Pride, a commitment to excellence, an entrepreneurial spirit and boundless passion are also essential ingredients in Jewish organizational transformation.

Holy work (*avodah kodesh*) requires no less.