

Big Ideas, Bold Solutions for JCSA

Charles **Edelsberg**

Never have I seen the Jewish community as turbulent—but also as generative—as it is today. Change—social, political, and certainly technological—is happening at an unprecedented rate. Let us consider the cycle of innovation and the attendant disruptions that change foists on us all.

The innovation chain proceeds something like this. First, an idea for a new product, invention, or service is contemplated as being **possible**. Then, we find the innovation **present** in our lives. If successful, the idea grows to be **popular**. It may actually become **pervasive**. And the most widely accepted of these products/inventions or new services work their way into our lives, gaining an almost **ubiquitous** presence.

So is there a big idea out there that can rejuvenate JCSA?

I am told that many of you would be surprised to discover that the organization needs an infusion of life blood—new members, substantially more operating revenue, and a plan for its future that evidences promise for sustainability. Yet that is the case, and that is why your participation in the JCSA Annual Meeting is critically important. You are professionals who appreciate that your work is part of a greater whole:

- a resilient Jewish community with an extraordinary history of organizing itself to take care of its own
- a woven tapestry of institutions and individuals whose values, faith practices, and shared history conjoin us as people who endure and prevail despite persecution, genocide, exile, and persistent anti-Semitism
- a community aspiring all the while to be an *ohr l'goyim*—a light unto the nations

You are the vanguard of your peers, looking for connection with other professionals, interested in continuing education and skill building, and cognizant that a broader awareness of Jewish demographics and insight into our community's sociology will make you a better professional.

But do you have the status of a professional in the organization that employs you?

Samuel Silberman, past president of a prominent New York Jewish agency, once remarked that “to be a profession, Jewish communal service must be more than Jewish workers working with Jews in and through Jewish-sponsored institutions.” He further asserted, “As the Jewish community matures, it tends to lose its blind faith in institutions and starts to demand defined objectives, effectiveness, and accountability. The question is not whether Jewish communal service will change; the question is will it survive. If it doesn't change, it can't survive.”

The question is not whether Jewish communal service will change; the question is will it survive.

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How surprised are you that Sam Silberman offered these predictions in an article in the JCSA journal 40 years ago!

More than a quarter-century after Silberman's article, Professor Gerald Bubis opined in another JCSA journal article that "there is still no agreement, except in counseling settings, as to what staff are supposed to know, how they are to apply their skills, and how to measure their competencies." In other words, the profession of Jewish communal service did not exist.

In that same 1999 essay—titled "The Jewish Communal Professional in the 21st Century"—Dr. Bubis observed that JCSA "as a standard-setter for the field and a representative for its members at a multiplicity of levels has never been given sanction."

Here we are, 13 years later, and nothing much has changed.

Yet the independent sector in which we all work is a growing part of the American economy, representing about 12% of our annual gross national product. In philanthropy, the proliferation of both information and funding intermediaries has dramatically changed the face of charitable giving. Those of us who enjoy the privilege of influencing how foundations award their grant dollars, as well as the responsibility for providing wise counsel on the strategic use of precious philanthropic resources, recognize that these intermediaries create new market dynamics. Knowing what these intermediaries are, why they were formed, and what their effects are constitutes a burgeoning body of knowledge that I must learn and master if I am to function effectively as executive director of a billion dollar Jewish foundation. It is but one aspect of the professional role I assume in leading the Jim Joseph foundation.

And so I pose this nagging question: Are we fundamentally *service providers* in a field? Or bona fide *professionals* by virtue of our command of knowledge, acquisition of skill sets, adherence to articulated standards of practice, commitment to relevant continuing education, and cultivation of expertise?

It should come as no surprise that I subscribe to the latter view.

I recognize, however, that if you approach your daily work as a job and not as an opportunity to develop a career as a Jewish professional, the question of whether you are a service worker or a Jewish professional may be irrelevant. I also acknowledge that practitioners who are the line labor force in the Jewish community confront a different set of questions about employment status than do senior management and chief executives.

Nevertheless, I want to challenge you to think about mutual interest. Is it advantageous to us, to the clients, and to the members of the institutions whose lives we endeavor to improve with our work, as well as to the board of directors who govern the organizations that employ us, to do the following?:

1. Codify a body of knowledge that represents, across our diverse settings, the core of what Jewish communal professionals should know
2. With such a corpus of knowledge identified, create a system of continuing professional education, participation in which leads to CPE credit
3. Establish mechanisms by which CPE credit earned leads to workplace rewards
4. Craft a universally accepted Jewish code of conduct for boards of director that, if violated in any egregious way by individual lay leaders, would result in sanctions for misconduct

Are we fundamentally service providers in a field? Or bona fide professionals...

I do not know whether we can accomplish these four daunting challenges, but I am convinced we need at long last to set about to do so—not with a blue-ribbon panel, but with a contemporary Sanhedrin; not with national summits, but with a genuine Jewish *kehillah* (community); and not by producing a “Contract With America” type document, but by crafting a communally endorsed covenant of principles and standards that would carry import, clout, and moral authority.

And although I am not clear that it is JCSA’s job to lead this effort—I am, in fact, skeptical that JCSA could do so without reengineering itself—I see this as an opportunity on which it is imperative for the organization to capitalize.

Envision just one scenario whereby a revitalized JCSA could facilitate your continuing education. I imagine a curated website containing profiles of and ratings on institutions of higher education that offer certificates and degrees in non-profit philanthropy, written by Jewish professionals who are graduates of the programs you might be contemplating pursuing. How helpful would it be to you to have a hub to go to learn about these multitude of options—and not by conducting a series of Google searches?

I see a future in which JCSA becomes a real Jewish communal professionals’ network—a **JCPN**. The JCPN would be a hub of job information and a link to sources of both Jewish and not-for-profit learning. The hub would offer its members details on courses, workshops, and webinars germane to their work; access to mentors; guidelines for enhancing their online professional presence; and opportunities for Israel experiences with a cross-section of Jewish professionals.

This reinvented organization would have formal relationships with career sites like jewishjobs.com and links to such sites as kveller.com and myjewishlearning.com that are customized to the user, referring him or her to recommended topics of interest based on that individual’s previous choices and preferences.

However, I have little confidence that my vision of a JCPN is either big or bold enough to be the solution I propose we seek—that of a single national organization possessing power and authority to shape goals, delineate essential knowledge (both Jewish and secular), facilitate continuing education, and sanction training for Jewish professionals.

No one individual alone is up to this task. The JCPN or JCSA needs your involvement if it is to flourish. The current JCSA leadership—all highly experienced Jewish communal professionals who are committed passionately to the future of this organization and are laden with good ideas—do not represent a sufficiently broad or deep enough sample of the Jewish professional stakeholders from throughout **your** networks to get us where we need to be.

Here is what young Jewish professionals have taught me: People get smarter in networks. As Steven Johnson notes insightfully in his 2011 book, *Where Good Ideas Come From*,

The truth is, when one looks at innovation... environments that build walls around good ideas tend to be less innovative in the long run than more open-ended environments. Good ideas may not want to be free, but they do want to connect, fuse, recombine. They want to reinvent themselves by crossing conceptual borders. They want to complete each other as much as they want to compete.

Permit me to conclude where we began: with *limmud* (learning) for me and for JCSA. I would like to ask for your wisdom. It exists in this “crowd,” I am certain.

People get smarter in networks.

Please share one big idea you would like your organization, JCSA, or the Jewish nonprofit communal world to explore; post it on www.facebook.com/Jewishcommunalserviceassociation. The idea can relate to anything: a benefit pool for all Jewish communal professionals; sabbaticals for managers and chief executives; cross-institutional Israel experiences for Jewish employees; a national Jewish professional training institute housed in a state-of-the-art retreat center.

We share common bonds, but I do not believe we pay enough attention to fostering “bridging capital” by crowdsourcing more of our innovation work, which in turn would animate spillovers of creativity and ingenuity.

I want to challenge you with a *mantra* that has become popular in the Bay Area. We used to say, “If it isn’t broke, don’t fix it.” Today, we might be better advised to contemplate that “if it works, it’s obsolete.”

The Association of the Social Scientific Study of Jewry (ASSJ) Announces the 2012 Berman Service Award and the 2012 Marshall Sklare Award

►The Association for the Social Scientific Study of Jewry (ASSJ) is proud to announce the inaugural recipients of the **Berman Service Award**. Named for Mandel “Bill” Berman, a great philanthropist and supporter of ASSJ and various other research entities, the Berman Service Award recognizes the work of leaders in many sectors of the Jewish community whose efforts have advanced the social science of Jewry. This year’s award goes to **Arnold Dashefsky** of the University of Connecticut in recognition of his distinguished commitment to the social scientific study of Jews through service to ASSJ, the North American Jewish Data Bank, and numerous other venues.

►The ASSJ is also proud to announce the 2012 **Marshall Sklare Award**, which is given annually to a senior scholar who has made a significant scholarly contribution to the social scientific study of Jewry. This year’s honoree is **Leonard Saxe**, Klutznick Professor of Contemporary Jewish Studies and Director of the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies and the Steinhardt Social Research Institute at Brandeis University. His Sklare address, “The Science of the Scientific Study of Jewry,” will be published in a forthcoming issue of ASSJ’s journal, *Contemporary Jewry*.

The Association for the Social Scientific Study of Jewry is an international, cross-disciplinary organization of individuals whose research and interests concern the Jewish people throughout the world. For more information on ASSJ or to join, visit the website www.assj.org or contact exec@assj.org.