

Sustainable Innovation and Jewish Life



At a *Sh'ma* forum on sustained innovation in contemporary Jewish life — held in NY in March — we explored the role of technology in Jewish innovative practices, the relationship of funder and innovator, and how Jewish communal organizations are both creating new boutique-like Jewish structures and reconfiguring older “legacy-style” organizations. **Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett** is University Professor and Professor of Performance Studies at New York University. Her book, *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times*, which she co-edited with Jonathan Karp, will appear in 2007, as will *They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland before the Holocaust* in collaboration with her father. **Morlie Levin** is Executive Director of Hadasah and formerly Vice President, Donor Strategic Relations of the L. A. Jewish Federation where she launched L.A.’s first Jewish venture philanthropy fund. **Nigel Savage** is the founder and director of Hazon (Hebrew for “vision”), a nonprofit that fosters new vision through outdoor and environmental education. Hazon, best known for its Jewish Environmental Bike Rides, in 2004 launched the first Jewish CSA (Community-Supported Agriculture project) in the U. S. **Martin Kaminer** is Director of Instructional Systems as well as Director of the Kaminer Family Foundation, where he has initiated a number of programs including Bikkurim and the Distance Learning Center, an online degree program at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He is the Founding Chair of Jewish Family and Life!, the publisher of *Sh'ma*. **Marcella Kanfer Rolnick** is a member of the board of the Jewish Funders Network and past co-chair of its Younger Funders Group. She is New Ventures Director at GOJO Industries and President and Chair of the Lippman Kanfer Family Foundation. **Jeffrey Solomon**, President of the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, moderated the Forum.

JEFFREY SOLOMON: It’s ironic that we have a session on sustainable innovation in Jewish life when indeed what is more innovative and sustainable than Jewish life itself? I want to share two thoughts on innovation. First, from a keen observer on American Jewish life, Professor Jonathan Sarna: “New historical conditions create new movements, new emphases, and new paradigms... We cannot place our trust in magic formulas. The most creative ideas for revitalizing Jewish life often flow from the bottom up rather than the top down, and from outsiders, rather than insiders. The young, the alienated, and those on the periphery of Jewish life precisely because they are not wedded to the community’s central assumptions tend to be the leadership.” Machiavelli supplies the second thought: “There is nothing more difficult to plan, more doubtful of success, no more dangerous to manage than the creation of a new system. For the initiator has the enmity of all who would profit by the preservation of old institutions and merely lukewarm defenders in those who would gain by the new ones.” In innovation, it is often hard work and inspired people who make extraordinary changes. With that, let’s turn to our first panelist.

BARBARA KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: I’m going to speak about new media technol-

ogy and innovation in contemporary Jewish life. Because technology is a prime site of innovation, I want to explore what Jews are doing with technology and what these technologies are doing to Jews. And where in this might we detect innovation.

So the first observation is that we’re dealing increasingly with a born-digital generation. It’s a fact of life especially among the young that they are literally born digital and that there’s a synergy of old and new media on and offline. Media has become a ubiquitous feature of daily life. New media are altering the nature of social relationships, social life, communities, and culture. When we say media, we tend to think of film, broadcasting, television, radio. The media that are making the big difference today are digital media, which are many-to-many and many-to-one, rather than one to many: websites, blogs, wikis, instant messaging, and various kinds of social software.

Nor are digital media confined to the hip and cool; Hasidim and Haredim are making extremely interesting uses of digital and other media. These media open up the Jewish world very wide and bring it into view in a way that is unprecedented, and at the same time they contribute to the formation of niches, that is, to internal differentiations that are as interesting as anything we know

historically. People are creating communities of interest and affinity groups based on connectivity, not proximity. In large measure this is a result of social software: Facebook, MySpace, blogging tools, Flickr, del.icio.us. These technologies are inclusive, participatory, non-dogmatic, non-authoritarian, and produce a vastly enlarged public space that requires radical trust, particularly in an environment of strangers.

The open source principle stems from the software industry where a lot of people who don't know each other collaborate without credit and without money to produce something. The way I define open source is the collective collaborative creation of a public good. Now what could be a more Jewish value? Open source produces a new modality that really alters the ways in which a younger generation approaches the world.

MORLIE LEVIN: I've just returned from Israel where my hotel room had a view of the walls of the old city. That view kept triggering me to think about this topic — reinvention. In order to reinvent, you need to excavate and touch that which is enduring. I want to cover three simple points. First, when you start down the road of reinvention, it's less about vision than about values. Why? Because values are things that endure: the essence of the organization... the essence of the enterprise. Vision takes you into the future where we all want to be. But you can't carve a sustainable path to the future unless you know what the values are, what the essence is. Second, I have learned that to begin the process, one must start by looking inward, talking to people, brainstorming, having meandering, wandering conversations. It's not the sort of thing that can be done quickly, which is frustrating for those of us who want quick answers and are looking for ways to maneuver through the maze that we call Jewish life. But there are no shortcuts.

Third, ultimately, successful reinvention is about aligning people and their skills with a mission that is enduring (and therefore contemporary). Jim Collins teaches that people need to be able to hold two competing attributes at the same time: humility and fierce determination. We operate in a complicated Jewish world. It's like playing three-dimensional chess — you take an action here, and it's not clear what the implications are going

to be three stories down and four committees over there, and it takes a while to sort it all out. But the enterprise is actually bigger than all of us. It's about the Jewish people, and that's why humility is so essential.

NIGEL SAVAGE: At Hazon we've essentially taken two existing models — the charity bike ride and the community-supported agriculture project — and framed them within Jewish community both to accomplish their original good and to renew Jewish life in a number of quite vital and new ways. I want to publicly pay testament to Bikkurim, a non-profit that Hazon went to three years ago. I am not a rabbi or a PhD, and I had never worked in this country; I'd never run a nonprofit. I look back in slight horror at the things that I genuinely didn't know I didn't know. And Bikkurim has been the place where we have learned our business. I'm deeply humbled by all of the things that I didn't know and all the mistakes that I've made. Bikkurim has played a unique role in helping me become an effective executive director.

How do we take a series of organizations that have shown promise and scale them up really seriously? I want to suggest that we all need to think bigger. The question is, how do we accomplish bigger? We need to think about development capital. In the private sector, you have a series of rounds. You have seed cap, venture cap, development cap, and then you have IPOs in the public market. Bikkurim and the other "incubator" programs have created Jewish seed capital. If you are a bright Jewish kid right now and you have a great idea, unlike ten years ago, there are a series of addresses that you can go to, not just for money, but for support. But we are still lacking a foundation that systematically and structurally offers development capital. Such funds would help organizations that have been around for three to five years with budgets of at least half a million dollars, that have a staff above a certain size, that have an effective board, good governance, evidence of support from the funding community, evaluation, clear metrics for program growth, evidence of partnerships, and the ability to scale a project.

The other piece I'd take from the private sector is inviting foundation people to take board seats. In general foundations don't take board seats in nonprofits because it

could limit maneuverability and their ability to cease funding the project. But ultimately taking a board seat is a sign of a real commitment in a relationship.

The world 50 years ago had three television networks and three Jewish denominations, and the map of organized American Jewish life reflected the real lives of Jews on the ground. But today we have 500 TV channels and maybe seven denominations, depending on how they're counted. But there are an infinite number of ways of living a Jewish life. There are only two things you can do when you have a people and a map. You can either squeeze the people in to fit the map, or you can change the map to reflect where the people are. And the organized map of Jewish life, which was built 50 and 100 years ago with its great institutions and great organizations, does not accurately reflect the map of the lived lives of Jewish people today. And since we cannot force the people into the old map, we have to build, together, a new map that reflects the community that we live in and the one that we want to see created.

MARTIN KAMINER: The truth is that Bikurim, Joshua Venture, and foundations that fund innovation are laudable but not widely replicable. The patience, the tolerance for failure, and the hands-off stance required are rare, and that's probably not going to change. So I thought I would comment on funding innovation in existing organizations, legacy organizations, the organizations that make up 99 percent of the world's Jewish communal infrastructure. It's imperative that organizations innovate if they're going to survive, and the place for them to seek funding for that innovation is within their own ranks.

When we have an idea for something innovative or sexy, we immediately try to think of a funder who we can pitch it to, who might find it appealing — in particular, a potential funder with whom we can establish a connection. This is great development tactics, but it's lousy innovation funding. The key to successful investment and innovation is managing risk, and the key to managing risk is knowledge, which is found inside an organization — among the board and current funders.

Existing funders, particularly board members, understand the organizations they fund and have a longer view. Funding innovation from outside your organization has a

number of factors that tend to impede success; the funders are apt to have less patience and tolerance for failure than your current funders and your current board members. And the lack of candor by your staff, which is inevitable in dealing with these new funders, is going to complicate the relationship. So even though it seems appealing to pitch an

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idea to somebody who seems a natural for it, it may not be the best way to bring innovation into your organization. But boards must understand that innovation is necessary for survival for every organization. Every organization should realize that even if they don't feel entrepreneurial, even if they don't feel avant-garde or sexy, they can make the smartest investments for innovation in their own organization smarter than any other mega fund, smarter than any matching fund, smarter than any mega-donor partnership. Nobody knows as much about these organizations as their own boards, their own current funders, and their own executives. Investment and innovation by an outside donor is a one-time game, and investment by an inside funder is a repeated game. And it's easier to introduce risk and failure into repeated games than into one-time games. The key to funding innovation is to leverage *existing* relationships with *existing* funders and board members and to lower the risk of failure through trust and experience.

I run a software company, and in that industry the practice is to allocate your investment between your current products, prior products, and future products in a ratio close to 70 percent, 15 percent, 15 percent. The investment in future products is small relative to the overall budget, but it's essential. In the software industry a company does it, or they're gone. There's no alternative. That's the kind of discipline that I would love to see nonprofits — and their boards — instill in an organization. Executive directors are the best judges of how to invest in innovation within their own organization. And board members

and current funders are the best people to demand it and fund it.

MARCELLA KANFER ROLNICK: Risk is risky, and sometimes there are failures. In fact, we need *smart* failures. While many people try to embrace smart failures, which lets them think they're pushing the envelope and going out on a limb, most people don't truly internalize and absorb what smart failure implies. I'd like to suggest that we all push ourselves to really try to fail, but to do it in a very smart, planful, methodical, strategic way. Something I learned from my dad is that we should never fire someone who makes a critical mistake on the job — barring any ethical lapses. Why would that be? That person has just learned a great deal from those mistakes and will be smarter next time around. Letting him or her go would be like getting out of an investment before the return comes in. A venture capital friend of mine told me that he expects — and feels good — that 80 percent of his investments fail. That's a mindset that none of us have — not even the risk-taking funders and risk-taking entrepreneurs.

Much of the time we're rushed to produce results, to show funders and the community that *Aha!* We've done something really big. But we miss the evolutionary process of prototyping, evolving, and going to scale. We need to evaluate projects through "After Action Reviews" and incorporate lessons learned so that we prototype, learn, assess what worked and what didn't, evolve, and then scale up. This will reduce "mega failures" and allow us to learn from "smart failures."

Adding onto Martin's software model of focusing 70-15-15 percent of a company on current projects, legacy projects, and innovation, I propose a mental model of three bands: direction-keeping, direction-setting, and breakthroughs. Picture this: three parallel bands, each with different conditions and expectations, attracting people with different personality types, appetites, and skill sets. Direction-keeping is maintenance of what already exists. Direction-setting tries to think ahead a little bit about the current reality so what already exists doesn't become irrelevant. But breakthrough is innovation; it's the stuff that you can't manage while addressing day-to-day operations.

Adding to what Barbara said about open source, often our focus in innovation is on

product. It's on product innovation. But really what we're talking about tonight is management innovation.

Additional Comments from the Audience and Panelists

JONATHAN WOOCHE: Innovation requires a different kind of self-discipline and different kind of compensation. Just as we need honest conversations about what is in the long-term working well, we must also have conversations about which innovations really are creating something that justifies sustainability. We need a strategy, a more systematic way to scale up those innovations. Sustainability alone is not a sufficient goal. We need to evaluate if something new is also better. In Jewish education, for example, the Covenant Foundation is funding what we would call "model building" to try to prove an innovation is superior to existing "best practices." And then they will be thinking scale.

JEFFREY: I want to push your point a little harder because we don't have a built-in value for outcome-evaluation, for stating clearly what our objectives are and measuring those objectives. Some donors, for example, give by instinct, and you get to them through their hearts; others give through thoughtful analysis after measuring impact.

MARTIN: We don't have a market mechanism by which the better mousetrap takes over, and the better model displaces lesser models. Really what's missing is an effective best practice sharing. But structural issues in the Jewish community inhibit dissemination and inhibit the best ideas from being picked up widely.

NIGEL: The best private sector example is the Sony Walkman. There was no research that could have been done that said, before it existed, that people wanted to listen to music when they were running or in the shower or in a swimming pool. Somebody, somewhere inside Sony, said, we think this is cool, let's do it, and 20 years later there are a billion Sony Walkmans and now iPods on the street. For innovation, we need a relatively small number of somewhat unreasonable people who say, "I think this is an amazing idea, let's make it happen." We also haven't spoken about how central the vision piece is to everything. Hadassah is about 100 years of tradition and

taking that vision into the future. The question is how to take the best ideas and not be confused by market research and instead say, this person has passion, this idea is a good one, this is scaleable, let's go.

Closing Comments

YOSEF I. ABRAMOWITZ: One of the things that I have seen in the work of Martin Kaminer and his family's philanthropy is that they bet on individuals with good ideas and dreams. They provide the back-end infrastructure support and ongoing leadership even when it gets tough. In this forum, *Sh'ma* wanted to model a conversation between the funding community and the innovators. As part of that, I want to suggest a new way to define and sustain innovation. First, gather a creative and diverse team with great values, who bring different skills, resources, and talents to the table — including infrastructure money. Second, we cannot continue to make the same mistakes that have been made in

previous generations of innovation. In 1969, Hillel Levine keynoted a session at the GA that resulted in a new institute for Jewish life that the professionals in Jewish life later killed because they felt threatened. Third, we must recognize the evil inclination, the *yetzar ha-ra* of ego, the *yetzar ha-ra* of turf, the *yetzar ha-ra*

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of feeling a lack of authenticity. This *yetzar ha-ra* prevents our generosity, our ability to give our gifts. It's the *yetzar ha-ra* of not wanting to collaborate. It's the *yetzar ha-ra* of wanting to rule and rule alone in most cases.

A way to overcome this evil inclination is not only to talk about it and to "out" it, but to find something so compelling that we can transcend issues of turf and ego and our fears. What just might be that compelling is an open conversation about a vision of the future of Jewish life. If we had a conversation that was inspirational, of course the philanthropy would be there. But too often our institutions and foundations only focus on smaller conversations about our programmatic vision for the future of Jewish life. We are failing to be trustees of the Jewish mission and vision. Morlie touched on humility, and this is important: to remember we're just dust who've been given such riches and such gifts. We need to rally those gifts to create new conversations and commitments to go toward a vision beyond our *yetzar ha-ra*.



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ISSN: 0049-0385 June 2006

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June 2006
Tammuz 5766
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