

# The Remaking of Hillel: A Case Study on Leadership and Organizational Transformation

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*Case Analysis*  
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# Introduction

All nonprofits have to manage issues related to leadership and succession, change, innovation, strategic alliances, stakeholder relations, governance, organizational design and organizational culture. In its recent history, Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life has addressed these issues in ways that can be instructive for other organizations. This Hillel case study has been written to offer insights into the dilemmas and challenges faced by leaders of nonprofit organizations.

## Toward Organizational Effectiveness in the Jewish Sector

Thousands of local, regional and national organizations serve the needs of the Jewish population in the United States. These organizations, comprising the Jewish sector of the American economy,<sup>1</sup> exist for a variety of purposes and meet a variety of needs — religious, cultural, educational, social service, philanthropic, political, fraternal, recreational, and social.

Despite their religious/ethnic focus, organizations in the Jewish sector are similar to organizations in the nonprofit sector with respect to fundamental

issues of leadership and management. To achieve their aims and satisfy stakeholders, all nonprofit organizations need both effective leadership and adequate financial resources. One need only pick up a newspaper for illustrations of the problems and failures that ensue when either leadership or finances are deficient. Thus, the intersection of organizational need, leadership, philanthropy and fundraising represents perhaps the most critical area of inquiry for improving organizational effectiveness in the nonprofit sector.

However, in spite of the existence of an extensive body of knowledge for improving organizational effectiveness in nonprofits,<sup>2</sup> it is surprising how little attention has been paid to making organizations in the Jewish sector more effective. One of the most common ways of improving organizational effectiveness is through management training, but data indicate that only about a quarter of those who hold high-level positions in the Jewish sector have participated in a professional development program.<sup>3</sup> Another way is through articles and books. However, a literature search reveals that virtually nothing has been written about this topic for the Jewish sector.

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent study on the Jewish sector, see Kelner, Rabkin, Saxe and Sheingold (2005).

<sup>2</sup> For a recent example, see Light (2004).

<sup>3</sup> This figure comes from re-analysis of the data in Kelner et al. (2004) by Shaul Kelner.

The Hillel case study represents an initial attempt to fill this gap. It has been written for several audiences. It is intended to help leaders in the Jewish sector think about organizational decision-making, with a special emphasis on fundraising and philanthropy. It has also been written for those who teach about Jewish organizations and nonprofits in universities and continuing education programs, and for scholars of the nonprofit sector. With this latter audience in mind, every attempt has been made to clarify terminology and provide background for the reader who is unfamiliar with the Jewish sector.

### About Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life

Hillel is widely regarded as one of the more effective, well-managed and progressive organizations in the Jewish sector, although as recently as the late 1980s this was not the case.<sup>4</sup> Hillel's current mission is to "enrich the lives of Jewish undergraduate and graduate students so that they may enrich the Jewish people and the world."<sup>5</sup> To accomplish this mission, Hillel's International Center in Washington, D.C. supports more than 250 affiliates that serve the needs of Jewish university students in the United States, Canada, Latin America, Australia, Israel, and the states of the former Soviet Union. Hillel's current international budget is \$60 million. Over \$34 million of this amount is raised through grants and contributions.<sup>6</sup>

Hillel's eighty-plus year history exemplifies the focus of this case study — the intersection of organizational need, leadership, philanthropy and

fundraising. The themes that are addressed here can be traced back to the organization's founding at the University of Illinois in 1923, when a professor and a businessman launched the first Hillel foundation and recruited a young, charismatic rabbi to lead it. The fledgling organization, which started in a room over a barbershop, struggled for resources. It eventually acquired funding through the efforts of its leader, with the support of his new board and through partnerships with other Jewish leaders and organizations. Hillel took on the new name of B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation shortly after its creation when it received generous support from B'nai B'rith, then a well-funded and well-regarded Jewish fraternal organization with a strong service orientation. The organization grew rapidly under the leadership of a series of dedicated rabbis and academic scholars.

Although Hillel built new facilities and expanded onto additional campuses, it also experienced a continuous struggle for adequate funding over the years, developing complicated financial dependencies on B'nai B'rith and on local Jewish community federations.<sup>7</sup> In the 1980s, the financial situation became acute as its organizational relations with B'nai B'rith went into decline. Programs were curtailed and student attendance stagnated. Inadequate resources made it difficult for the organization to attract rabbis to lead local campus foundations, and a number of dedicated rabbis who had been leading local Hillels left to pursue other opportunities. Those who stayed were highly dissatisfied with the organization's national leadership. The wider Jewish communal world had a poor opinion of Hillel, was not interested in

<sup>4</sup> See Abramowitz (1995).

<sup>5</sup> The mission statement was changed in 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Dollar figures are taken from Hillel's 2004 annual report (Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Like the United Way, federations are centralized organizations in local Jewish communities. They engage in fundraising and make allocations to Israel and to a variety of domestic agencies and organizations. Prior to 1999, the Council of Jewish Federations was the coordinating body for federations across the United States and Canada. This coordinating body is now called the United Jewish Communities.

funding it, and did not see college students as a group deserving of support. Israel, Soviet and Ethiopian Jewry, and the poor were the primary beneficiaries of available resources.

When Richard Joel, who was neither an insider nor a rabbi, became the surprise choice as International Director in 1988, he inherited these problems and set about transforming the organization. Joel articulated a defining vision of what Hillel could become and developed a strategy to implement his vision, involving stakeholders at every stage. Many changes were necessary. College students were being ignored by the Jewish community and were not being recognized as the future of American Jewry. Hillel directors on campus — most of whom were rabbis — were not receiving sufficient support from the national office. In many cases, the services they provided to students were in need of improvement and their individual efforts were not aligned with the mission of the national office. Hillel's national office was financially dependent upon B'nai B'rith and was not providing adequate leadership for the national movement. The Council of Jewish Federations and local federations did not view Hillel as the central Jewish address on campus and did not provide enough support to Hillel at the local, regional, and national levels. Philanthropists did not appreciate the organization's mission and were not directing their resources to the organization so that it could achieve its mission.

From 1988 to 1995 Joel succeeded in changing all of these arenas and remade the organization, dramatically changing both its reputation in the Jewish communal world and its presence on

campuses. According to his associates, he accomplished this through a combination of shrewd political maneuvering, disarming candor, artful language, sophisticated strategic thinking and charisma. One additional factor was his singular talent at developing friendships and alliances with influential individuals who were moved to embrace his vision and help him implement it. When Joel started in 1988, Hillel's annual budget was \$14 million. By the time he left in 2003 to become the president of Yeshiva University in New York, the budget had quadrupled.

Joel's efforts were aided by the findings of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey that found a dramatic rise in the intermarriage rate among Jews over the previous twenty years. This study changed the orientation of the Jewish community as "Jewish continuity" became a compelling concern. Providing services to Jewish college students was suddenly viewed as an important way to ensure the future of American Jewry and reverse the trends toward assimilation. Joel capitalized on this development and convinced the Jewish community that Hillel could provide a solution.

## Method

The material in this case study is based on interviews, reports, memos, speeches, press releases, periodicals and other documents.<sup>8</sup>

Beginning in 2001, extensive personal interviews were conducted with 26 key individuals associated with Hillel, B'nai B'rith, the Council of Jewish Federations, and philanthropic foundations. The interviews emphasized the period from 1988 to 1995. Several individuals who were familiar with

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix A for a list of interviewees and a details about the method used in writing the case study.

the organization's history generated the initial list of interviewees. Additional names were subsequently added at the recommendation of interviewees. Quotations in the text of this case study not accompanied by a footnote are taken from transcripts of these interviews.

## Outline of the Case

Although the story told herein has been skillfully presented elsewhere,<sup>9</sup> this case study provides greater depth and presents the story behind the story. It offers an account of the transformation of a stagnant nonprofit into a thriving international organization.

The case is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1: Hillel's Rabbinic Culture (1923–1988) begins with Hillel's founding, continues with a brief narrative of its early years and early leaders, and then presents an in-depth description of Hillel's development from the 1960s through the 1980s to set the stage for Richard Joel's arrival. During this period, many Jewish students stayed away from Hillel, the organization was troubled by labor problems and its growth was hampered as a consequence of its entanglements with and between local federations and its parent organization, B'nai B'rith. Toward the latter part of the 1980s, a search for a new International Director began.

Chapter 2: New Leader, New Vision (1988–1992) begins with Richard Joel's first days in the position and describes the problems and challenges he inherited and needed to address. It discusses his new vision for the organization, his efforts to bring about change, and his attempts to convince both internal and external stakeholders that change was needed, not just for the benefit of college students, but for the benefit of the entire Jewish community.

Chapter 3: Realizing the Vision (1992–1995) explains how Richard Joel was able to implement his vision despite a financial crisis brought about by a precipitous decline in allocations from B'nai B'rith. Forced to find new funding, he established relationships with private philanthropists, worked behind the scenes to change the longstanding system of allocations from the federations and established a new development function. At the same time, he created an entirely new legal entity that enabled Hillel to become fully independent of B'nai B'rith.

## A Brief Note About Case Studies<sup>10</sup>

A case is a factual description of historical events. Case studies have been used widely in a variety of fields to enhance learning as well as to link theory and practice. Few cases, however, have been written about Jewish organizations. Our intent here is to fill this gap and to foster new learning, as Jewish organizations are simultaneously similar to and different from other nonprofits. Our intent is also to help enhance Jewish organizations through the study of such cases.

Case studies have been written in a number of different formats. One format used widely in business schools is known as the “decision focus” case, in which the reader is given a series of facts and is placed in the role of decision-maker. Having the reader simulate a leadership role gives this format pedagogical advantages over other formats. However, such cases are generally limited to a single decision.

The story of Hillel, in contrast, concerns the cumulative effects of a series of decisions, actions, and events over the course of seven years that

<sup>9</sup> See Rubin (2000) and Rubin (2003).

<sup>10</sup> The material in this section is derived from Naumes and Naumes (1999).

essentially culminated in a new organization. We have therefore written the story of Richard Joel and Hillel as an “evaluative” case, using a format in which a series of events are described. This approach provides the reader with an opportunity to evaluate the various choices made by the actors in the story and to develop theoretical interpretations of the events.

The Case Analysis by Amy Sales, Director of the Fisher-Bernstein Institute for Jewish Philanthropy and Leadership at Brandeis University, offers lessons that can be derived from the case and presents some of these theoretical interpretations.