

Dov's Fifth Annual Report

In my past CEO reports¹ I would summarize our successes and challenges from the prior year, and look to the year ahead. But what's to stop us from thinking creatively about the future?

Join me, therefore, in the summer of 2029, as we look back at the last ten years. What have we learned? What have we become? And how did we get here?

Dear Board members,

Welcome to the summer of 2029.

We're approaching the end of a decade of change: the 2020's. Artificial intelligence and automation takes on once-impossible tasks; Holographic Light Field Displays are replacing our TV's and screens, and Augmented Reality is creating new opportunities for learning and safety. We're more connected – and disconnected – than ever before. Two billion jobs have disappeared in the last ten years – and an equal number has appeared, in new forms in new industries. Each of us is connected to over twenty separate devices daily.² And, unsurprisingly, our attention span has dropped to less than that of a goldfish!³

In our Jewish community and Federation, many would claim that the developments of the last decade were surprising and unpredicted. But as Elie Wiesel once reminded us, **there are no coincidences in Jewish history.**

Things happen because smart people plan, prepare, execute and assess.⁴

There are more Jews than ever before. Our community discussions on assimilation and intermarriage prompted a series of meaningful and charged conversations about who we are. We worked with our rabbis and educators and community representatives, but initially our terminologies were alienating and unhelpful: were Jews *assimilating* or *integrating*? Were young Jews *distancing* themselves from the community, as some claimed, or were they just *differencing* from programs and institutions that weren't relevant to them? What happened the day after a Jewish-Other couple married? Did we reject them, turn them away from our community, or did we help create new opportunities to reach out, to include, to grow?

Ten years ago, in places like Boston and San Francisco, where most Jewish-Other families were *already* raising their children as Jews, something interesting was happening. The idea that intermarriage was a complete rejection of Jewish life (and represented a full and unrecognizable absorption into the larger culture) was

patently untrue, and offensive to hundreds of thousands of households with a Jewish parent raising Jewish children.⁵ After exhausting all the other options, including ignoring the issue, we chose to be welcoming. So we learned how to expand and to be more inclusive. We recognized that defining intermarriage and assimilation synonymously alienates and estranges. Becoming more welcoming wasn't a linear path. It still isn't. But with a more inclusive outreach program, we're more Jewish, both numerically and ethically.

We're different here. It's been clear for some time that Greater MetroWest is unique. Not just because we're the largest non-city Jewish Federation in the country, and not just because our Community Survey showed that we're one of the largest absorbers of new Jewish families (35-50 year olds) from the cities. It's also because we've become a *functional federation* – a Jewish Federation that takes on tasks that no one else can do, building a sense of shared community. The Community Survey, launched as we approached our 2023 Centennial, pointed to growing areas of need, as well as to areas of opportunity. It allowed us to map out our social and communal services, while deepening our commitment to our agencies and synagogues with shared services and planning.

So much has changed since 2027 with the opening of the Gateway Program,⁶ the massive strategic rail infrastructure program doubling the capacity of passenger trains running under and over the Hudson River. With additional bridges expected to open in the next few years, we're rediscovering our close ties to the New York economy, with a shorter and increasingly efficient commute (and rising house prices). The work we began in the 2015-2020 period in branding our Greater MetroWest community as a single cohesive community was prescient, since the name of each of our 65 towns and villages isn't the name of the wider community. For decades now the majority of our 18-year olds have left the community, to go to university and spend their 20's in the 'big cities.' But the renewed ease of the commute to Manhattan has accelerated the attraction of Greater MetroWest, and highlighted the need to further brand and market our efforts. We deepened a regional recruitment plan in Manhattan, a concierge program to welcome and connect new people moving in, and an ever-growing Outreach & Engagement platform, to reach out to those living here and looking for community, however they define it. The change is constant, ongoing and never-ending, and *if you don't like change, you're going to dislike irrelevance even more.*⁷

Our future is more secure. Having our Federation's Centennial back in 2023 deeply touched so many long-term supporters in our community. They built

endowments and left legacy gifts that will one day provide as much as half of our Annual Campaign from endowment income; they also built endowments for key programs and agencies, allowing us to focus even more on providing quality programs that meet the ever-evolving and expanding needs. What's more, programs generated by the Centennial engaged a new generation of volunteers and leaders, who look at things differently than prior generations but share that love of Greater MetroWest and making a difference.

We switched to a January-December Annual Campaign model, saving money and hassle. We fully integrated our Campaign, Foundation, and Outreach efforts into a single streamlined approach, with Giving/Innovation Circles, professional networks, expanded programs for our loyal and long-standing donors, and much more. Everything is a single marketing brand, focused on serving our community, our supporters, and their philanthropy. It's true that marketing isn't everything – but *everything is marketing*. So our infographics dashboards not only show you Federation's budget and what the community looks like, where the density and institutional life of Greater MetroWest resides, how our community functions and thrives – they're also *you*-centric. They show you *your* own philanthropy in the community: your pledges, your commitments, your impact.

We continue to upgrade our global, communal, and Israel commitments. No one brings Israel to New Jersey like our Jewish Federation: *#WeLiveIsrael*. No one can convene, mobilize, support, and gather the pro-Israel community like us. But we also upgraded our investment in the *Rishonim* (pre-army) and *Shlichim* (post army) emissary program because *they were coming here as Israelis but returning home as Jews*. And not 'just' Jews, but passionate, knowledgeable and committed Jews, who want the same kinds of expression and identity in Israel that we've worked so hard to achieve here in North America. The thirst for Jewish life is inspiring. Make no mistake, there's real hunger in Israel, in the Jewish world, and in our community – and we're committed to meeting that challenge too. Our commitment to meeting that Jewish thirst and hunger together is the basis of our Peoplehood and Partnership programs, making our Jewish Federation the best place to have that conversation, to convene the community, to connect dots, and to bring Jewish life together.

While we rose to meet the challenges of BDS and political attacks against Israel (and Jewish students) on campus, we also worked to further the immersive-identity infrastructure in our schools, youth groups, summer camps, and Hillels, engaging thousands of young people along a 20-year continuum of learning and experiencing Israel, while making our camps and agencies and synagogues more accessible, safer, and inclusive.

We worked with our colleagues in our international partner agencies to refocus programs together as a *Global Jewish Peace Corps*. The original concepts were creative and thoughtful, even when siloed among different organizations, but the wider platform offers a massive opportunity for young Jews from Israel, America and around the globe to serve communities and enhance our commitment to repairing the world. It is, in the Jewish communal colloquial speech, “the next Birthright.” Over the next generation, it’ll be a game-changer for how young Jews see themselves and the world around them.

We remain the ‘someone else.’ We remain committed, along with our partners, to rescue and relief programs locally and around the Jewish world. There are still tens of thousands of Shoah (Holocaust) survivors who rely on our support and our values as they age with dignity. We can’t forget our obligation and commitment to those who are vulnerable, aging, have disabilities, or are at risk. Partnerships with our agencies, CARES, ABLE, Chaplaincy and more are a deep continued commitment to this mission. No one in Greater MetroWest says that “someone else should take care of this.” We *are* the someone else.

We worked hard on security these past years. We’ve developed a blended model that learned from the best practices from other Jewish communities, respecting the uniqueness of New Jersey communal life. That helped us create a unified platform with other faith communities to secure State funding for this massive undertaking. Our model – a strong overlay of community security training, awareness programs, and alert systems – covers several hundred identifiably Jewish sites and buildings. Will it be enough? We’re continually learning, adapting, reshaping.

Meanwhile, **our Federation is stronger, healthier, better and more impressive than ever before.** Our Annual Campaign rose consistently. We recruited inspiring leaders and volunteers for our Board and programs. We broke down silos and focused on excellence. We pushed for health care and retirement benefits for all our professionals and their families, and we widened that commitment to everyone who works in our Jewish community. We invested heavily to enhance their skills, highlighting our reputation as a magnet for the best Jewish communal professionals in the world. We went hyper-local, starting with the JCC-Central NJ ‘Great Room’ and deepening our local ties around the communities and towns. We deepened our evaluation and feedback culture, created a strong mentorship ethos, sharpened our responsiveness to communal needs, and improved our hiring process and philosophy. Why? Because plans and strategies are critical, but *culture eats*

*strategy for breakfast every day.*⁸ And we know that culture attracts talent – but talent *builds* culture.

Ten years ago. If I had the incredible ability to go back in time and tell our 2019 community leadership what to prepare and how to plan, I'd keep it simple and short. I'd tell them to prepare three things:

First, commit to the full, extensive and wide-ranging Community Survey. You won't find the funding for it in one year, and that's ok. You'll spread the funding over many years of budget. But without the Community Survey you'll never find out some of the surprising challenges and opportunities that our community will face in the next ten years. How many Jews live in Greater MetroWest? Where do we live? What do we join? What makes us Jewish? What do we care about? What do we need?⁹

Second, don't despair. Keep pushing the counter-cultural concept of the collective, even though it'll still feel at times like an uphill struggle in the face of cynicism, alienation and disenchantment. Time and demography are on the side of the optimists, and specifically on the side of Generations Y and Z and Millennials. Since the days of Horace, we've been conditioned to think that our children will do (and be) worse than us.¹⁰ But our next generations have levels of altruism, energy and community commitment that are qualitatively *stronger* than those of their predecessors. Hang in there. From the mid 2020's the tide will turn and the new normal of passionate collective engagement will be ascendant.

Third, celebrate the many ways to 'do' Jewish here. For decades, the strength of Greater MetroWest has been in the diverse passions and interests of its leaders and activists. It was rare even in the 2010s for someone to sit on Federation's board without participating in other agencies or synagogues. What started out as a recognition of a communal reality became a powerful positive value. Don't just do one Jewish thing. Join in, compare and contrast, learn together, question and join.

One final thought. Many of our most prominent, generous, and active federation, synagogue and agency leaders today in 2029 were just beginning their communal obligations ten years ago. They faced enormous barriers to joining the community in 2019 – the high cost of living Jewishly, a difficult-to-traverse leadership path, and the challenges of multiple agencies and overlapping communal spheres and territories.

Imagine what they felt as they looked for a welcoming face in our huge buildings and awe-inspiring institutions.

But here they are. And it's no coincidence or mere luck.

Because there are no coincidences in Jewish life. They walked in to the building, they sat down, they joined in, because we welcomed them.

Because we smiled.

Because we made it less intimidating.

Because we made it easier, and more meaningful to join than to be alone.

Because we're Greater Together.

ENDNOTES

¹ You can read all my previous CEO reports here: <http://www.dovbenshimon.com/leadership-updates.html>

² This is probably an undercount. We're predicted to have 13 networked devices and connections per person in North America by 2021. So by 2029, according to Moore's Law, we may be close to double that number. See <https://www.mediapost.com/publications/article/302663/north-american-consumers-to-have-13-connected-devi.html>

³ Eight seconds, to be precise. This was already noticed in 2013. See <https://www.iflscience.com/brain/do-you-have-lower-attention-span-goldfish/>

⁴ The US Army's framework for exercising mission command is the **operations process** – the major mission command activities performed during operations: planning, preparing, executing, and continuously assessing the operation. It's an extremely useful tool for organizations like a Jewish Federation, to drive a conceptual and detailed planning model to understand, visualize, and describe the operational environment; make and articulate decisions; and direct, lead, and assess our operations.

⁵ <https://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/intermarriage-assimilation-are-not-interchangeable/>

⁶ See, for example <https://nec.amtrak.com/project/the-gateway-program/> and <http://www.gatewayprogram.org/> and <https://www.portalbridgenec.com/>

⁷ Usually attributed to Gen. Eric Shinseki. See https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Eric_Shinseki

⁸ Usually attributed to Peter Drucker, but the story behind the attribution is quite interesting too. See <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2017/05/23/culture-eats/>

⁹ The San Francisco Jewish Federation has an excellent summary of its community survey and findings at <https://jewishfed.org/community-study> See also that of Boston <https://www.jewishdatabank.org/databank/search-results/study/813> and Pittsburgh <https://jfedpgh.org/file/scorecard/PittsburghJewishCommStudy021918.2.pdf> and especially DC's superb report <https://www.brandeis.edu/ssri/pdfs/communitystudies/DCJewishCommunityStudy.pdf>

¹⁰ *“Worse than our grandparents' generation, our parents' then produced us, even worse, and soon to bear still more sinful children.”* Horace, Odes 3:6.