

'We are not reaching nearly enough Jews'



Dov Ben-Shimon looks ahead after first year as federation CEO

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Five days shy of his first anniversary as executive vice president/CEO of the Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest NJ, Dov Ben-Shimon sat back in an armchair in his Whippany office and smiled.

"It's been a fascinating year in which I've been privileged to see the strengths and challenges and horizons of our Jewish community," he said. "I come to work every day with an immense feeling of responsibility and anticipation to see how we connect as a Jewish community and what the potentials and possibilities are in store for us."

But to Ben-Shimon those potentials and possibilities come with big challenges.

"We are not reaching nearly enough of the Jews in our community," he said. "We are not reaching nearly enough of the potential that we can make in connecting our agencies, our synagogues, and our organizations to each other. We have a unique opportunity in the year ahead to deepen those connections."

Ben-Shimon, a native of England and a former medic in the Israeli military, came to the federation last September after serving as the assistant executive vice president of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. He succeeded Max Kleinman, who retired after 19 years in the position.

In the fiscal year ending June 30 — the first full campaign year for Ben-Shimon and new president Leslie Dannin Rosenthal — the federation raised \$26.6 million, topping the previous year's total of \$24,500,016, the first such increase in three years.

Ben-Shimon, his staff, and volunteer leaders hope the trend is a reflection of how they have created new structures and reorganized old ones to broaden their outreach to the 125,000 Jews who live in the Greater MetroWest area, which includes Essex, Morris, Sussex, Union, and parts of Somerset counties.

The federation streamlined its board from 210 to 65 members and its executive committee from 65 to 20 "in order to make us more efficient, more flexible, more responsive, more turn-on-a-dime," Ben-Shimon said.

In addition, the federation restructured its campaign department and reassigned significant efforts — the Young Leadership Division, its Service and Volunteerism Division, and Generation X recruitment — to a new Outreach and Engagement Division.



Dov Ben-Shimon, in his office on the Aidekman campus in Whippany, said he remains committed to the idea of a Jewish communal philanthropy that transcends denominations and turf battles.

Photo by Robert Wiener

“What that means is that rather than saying to people prior to an event they have to give an annual campaign gift, first we want them to come through the door and see what the Jewish community is,” said Ben-Shimon.

Once they do, he is confident that they’ll see and be inspired by how the annual UJA Campaign helps people in Israel and around the Jewish world, and they’ll share its donors’ “sense of purpose and a sense of connectivity.”

‘A common message’

As an umbrella philanthropy, the federation movement has been buffeted in recent years by growing divisiveness within the Jewish community and a trend toward individualized giving.

But Ben-Shimon remains committed to the idea of a Jewish communal philanthropy that transcends denominations and turf battles.

“To explain to an Orthodox Jew in Linden or a Conservative Jew in Livingston or a Reform Jew in Flanders the commonalities of the Jewish community and the role of the federation has been one of the most challenging and fascinating aspects of this year,” he said. The federation idea is that “here is a common message to everybody. We care, we build, and we save. We promote a kind, compassionate Jewish community. We build Jewish life and leadership, and we save the world one person at a time. That is the core of what the federation does, and we have to do it with passion, we have to do it with Jewish values, and we have to do it with inspiration.”

Greater MetroWest leaders faced another major challenge in July, as its board of trustees worked to reach consensus on how to react to the Iran nuclear agreement. Federations around the country debated whether they should weigh in on the deal and possibly alienate donors who disagreed with whatever decision was reached, or stay neutral and anger those who felt the issue was too important to be ignored.

Ultimately, the Greater MetroWest board voted to oppose the deal.

“It was extremely tough,” Ben-Shimon said. “We are still getting a lot of feedback, and I am grateful for all the feedback we have received — positive, negative, and neutral.”

Asked whether the trustees’ definitive stand against the agreement might have a negative financial or other impact, Ben-Shimon said, “I think it is premature to say what the effect of the decision was because we are still in the middle of this process in terms of the congressional decision-making.”

The federation has also been a strong advocate for religious pluralism in Israel in the face of increasing Orthodox influence there. Some community members object to that stance, either on religious grounds or because they don’t think a federation should be part of Israel’s internal debates.

“It has always been tough,” Ben-Shimon acknowledged. “It has always been challenging. But there are vast strengths in Israeli society. We have to be respectful of Israel’s democracy while at the same time, we should never be shy and never be afraid of promoting our values.”

When it comes to attracting non-affiliated Jews to the federation world, Ben-Shimon conceded, “There are too many people in our community who feel alienated or disenfranchised.... I hope within one year’s time we will be able to point to a significant expansion of the number of Jews connected to Jewish organizational life and communal life and in the number of meaningful cultivated relationships between our synagogues and agencies.”

He called for “a higher tolerance for creativity” inside the federation.

“It is expected in the business world but it is sometimes frowned upon in the nonprofit world,” he said. “We should be accepting and rewarding good-faith attempts to push us to do better, even at the risk of failure.”

As he looked back on his first year in office, Ben-Shimon said, he had no doubt about the most enjoyable part of the job.

From mid-June until early July, he and his children, eight-year-old twins Eitan and Yael, and their mother, Leslie Klieger, went to Israel on a visit to federation partnership communities there.

“To be with them in yoga class in Ofakim, on an ostrich farm in Merchavim, to see the incredible community Kibbutz Erez has built, and to realize these partnerships are part of Greater MetroWest, was an incredible experience. I was able to show my kids how impressive the successes of this federation are and my pride in being part of it,” he said.

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