

Commencement Address
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July, 1986. I am behind the wheel of a 1978 Chevy Impala. Dusty car. A dusty, Wisconsin road. Doesn't matter to me. I round the corner and hit the straightaway. I know the speed limit, but I am the man, I am in charge and with Springsteen blaring through the static on the radio, I push that old Chevy to speeds unheard of in these parts. A blazing 20 miles per hour. At that moment, all is great.

As I come out of the next turn, there he is: standing in the middle of the road, none other than my boss, the man who put me in charge of 12-14 year olds, the camp director. He knows me well, as I have been a long time camper and now, I am on staff. This is my 10th summer at camp and I know every inch of this place, including all the rules. "Rosenberg," he yells, "slow down! What are you thinking?"

Leadership. It is around us at all times and manifests itself in so many ways. Sometimes you are the one to be led - like me on that road - and at other times, it is you who needs to demonstrate leadership, like me with my campers. Leadership is hard to do well. And understanding and succeeding in leadership within the Jewish community? Well, that adds a whole other layer of complexity. We are Jewish after all.

Where can one turn to get his or her arms around the issue of being a competent, effective and inspiring leader in the Jewish community besides the wisdom found in Hal's eJewish philanthropy essays? The books on leadership are endless. Who among us hasn't spent time browsing through the titles in the leadership or management section of a bookstore in search of answers to the question of what it takes to be that great leader...or more to the point, how to exercise leadership at a high level?

We all have thoughts on what some of the keys to successful leadership are and while I will share my own ideas with you, at the end of the day, we who work in the Jewish community have a simple choice to make: Will we just go through the motions and focus more on the "to do lists" without a philosophy or discipline that guides our work? Or are we going to be purposeful and intentional in how we approach our work, and will we use that focus to guide how we interact with colleagues and volunteers?

Jewish communal professionals have an awesome responsibility. The stakes are high as we try our best to sustain and transform our community while dealing with issues such as assimilation, anti-Israel sentiment and living in a scarier world than five years ago, let alone five weeks ago. It can be intimidating and daunting to think about what role we can play and to wonder, in

the grand scheme of things, if being a more equipped and better prepared professional even matters in the face of such big challenges?

But it does. Just like the custodian sweeping the floor at NASA who famously told President Kennedy in 1962 that he, the custodian, was helping put a man on the moon, so, too, should we embrace the idea that if everyone does his or her part, whether one's leadership charge is on a small scale or a large stage, we will each help accomplish what needs to get done in the face of these issues. And we'll feel better about taking on the awesome responsibility of leadership.

Back to that Chevy, the Boss on the radio, and the other boss, the camp director, standing in the middle of the road, staring me down.

He was right of course. That Chevy was a camp car and the straightaway was the camp road. And we all knew that 10 miles per hour was the speed limit, no matter how ridiculous it sounded. He was mad, I blew it, and there was nothing I could say or do to change the facts. I thought for a moment, considered the situation, and realized all I could offer was: "But Jerry, I am your Ben Yachid!"

Ben Yachid. My only son. Every summer at OSRUI, I had heard Jerry Kaye tell the same story on Shabbat and I figured I should put it to use.

The story is of a well-known yeshiva with a stellar reputation for the kindness and compassion of its graduates. One day, the head of the yeshiva receives a visitor who's curious about how the school has earned its reputation. The head of the yeshiva takes the visitor on a tour of the school and when they reach the first class room he points to a student and says, "Do you see that boy over there? That is my *ben yachid*, my only son." The visitor exclaims, "How wonderful that your only son attends your school!"

The two continue to the next classroom and the head of the yeshiva once again says, "Do you see that boy over there? That is my *ben yachid*, my only son." This confuses the visitor, but not wanting to offend his host, he just nods and follows the head of the yeshiva down the hall. They reach a third classroom and the head of the yeshiva points through the door and says, "Do you see that boy over there? That is my *ben yachid*, my only son."

This continues as the two men visit a fourth, a fifth, and a sixth classroom. Finally, the visitor can't contain his confusion any longer and says, "Rabbi, how is it possible that in every classroom you point to a different boy and say that he is your only son?"

"You came here wanting to know how our school sends such kind and compassionate graduates out in the world," the Rabbi responds. "Here is the answer: I tell my teachers that every one of our students should all be treated as if each one of them is our *ben yachid*, our only son."

After I reminded Jerry who I was, that is, that I was his Ben Yachid, he laughed, told me never to push that Chevy faster than 10 mile per hour, and let me go on my way.

The story of Ben Yachid and that day at camp has stuck with me and I think about it often in the context of leadership, particularly within Jewish organizational life. As a father of three girls, I, of course, also think about it in parenting, as each one of my daughters is my Bat Yachida.

But in your own workplace, when you think about others, particularly those who work for you and your dedicated volunteers, do you think of each of them as your Ben Yachid? Do you treat them that way? Do they feel you are behind them and support them? No book or person can tell you how to do that. It has to come from inside and a motivation to relate to others in a certain way and a desire to foster such relationships within your organization.

There are numerous examples of what leadership means and how to practice it effectively. The lessons I have learned over the years which have guided my leadership fall into three areas of intentional focus. They help me approach my role and practice in the Jewish community, and help me do my part to make this world a better place.

Those three areas, or lessons on leadership, are:

1. Habits matter, even if no one notices
2. Principles and values form the bedrock of good decisions.
3. How you treat others and how they feel is more important than anything else.

Let's take these one at a time.

Habits.

What are the habits on my list? They are quite simple. They are personal behaviors. They are about being a good colleague and working smart. Your list may be different. But just as a customer brands a company by how he or she views that company and its products, others watch how we, as leaders, operate and they judge us. Don't we want to be judged favorably? We all want to be liked and admired. How we conduct ourselves couldn't be more important.

So what are my habits? I've got a few. Actually six.

Be on time.

Be prepared.

Be reasonable.

Be present.

Be humble.

Be willing.

You'll notice that I didn't include be nice, be pleasant, be approachable, or always pay attention. No one can do all things and be on 100% of the time as the perfect leader, or for that matter, the perfect person. But these six speak to an approach I try to have toward others and to my job. Failing to stick to good habits will get you more noticed. People may not notice if you are always on time and really, who wouldn't expect you to be prepared and to be a reasonable and decent colleague?

It's like an umpire in a baseball game. If you don't notice him or her, chances are the job is being done well. It's only when an umpire makes a bad call that he or she gets the attention. The attention should be on the players. Likewise, the attention should be on our work. If other stuff gets in the way, it becomes a distraction.

Those are my six habits.

There's a seventh. Don't reply all to very large group emails. Never a good thing.

Attitude and behaviors really do make a difference. Ask those boys at that Yeshiva, who are all a Ben Yachid. Ask my 19 year old self going too fast down a camp road.

Good habits matter.

How does one get to a point of embracing the habits and behaviors that make a difference? By believing in them and recognizing that what they represent are important to you. Your actions are a result of certain truths or principles that guide you. Values. A moral compass. To succeed in leadership, you need to have a set of values that you can count on both personally and to frame your work.

This is my second lesson.

I strongly believe in the concept of values. Good values guide good decision making and good leadership practice. I talk about values whenever I can in my job and with my colleagues at JUF because we need our jobs to be more than just a job. Values enhance a culture. There have to be driving forces that help us understand, both as a collective and as individuals, why we are in this business in the first place. The head of that Yeshiva in the Ben Yachid story surely was guided by a set of principles and priorities.

While there are many lists of values out there, I like these.

This is a list of 25 motivational values and they come from a deck of value cards produced by 21/64, a non-profit consulting practice at the Andrea & Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, specializing in next generation and multigenerational engagement in strategic philanthropy and family enterprise. I take these cards wherever I go and often use them when meeting with donors to get at the heart of what is important to them.

Each one represents a different value that may influence one's decision making when it comes to personal or philanthropic choices.

*Helping, family, friendship, compassion, responsibility, loyalty, effectiveness, justice, integrity, leadership, tradition, recognition, opportunity, obligation, freedom
personal growth, courage, pleasure, equity, spiritual growth, community, power
innovation, risk and tolerance.*

The exercise with donors is quite simple. They are asked to pick three or four that speak to them in the context of giving, with the point being that their everyday values can be and should be

aligned with their values around giving. From there, the conversation takes off and it is very rich and meaningful. And it is a great way, by the way, to break the ice with a first-time meeting as well.

But they don't have to be just for donor meetings. They can be for the workplace as well. What speaks to you when you think about why you have pursued a career in Jewish communal service? Do you value tradition? Justice? Compassion? Maybe the idea of helping or responsibility is particularly meaningful.. Maybe one of your values is not on this list? The key is to find a personal connection and a broader meaning. And yes, sometimes a job is a job and a task is a task. There may not be an obvious value associated with that killer email you wrote or that successful meeting you ran. But if you dig deep, it is there. And you should acknowledge it.

You may also feel like you want to embrace a certain value but are not always successful in doing so. For instance, I value integrity and I feel like I do well in sticking to it. It is important to me, to my job and to how I want others to view me. I also value opportunity, yet I am not so sure I always take an opportunity when available. It is something I try to work on, as feelings of regret are a powerful motivator for the next time.

And of course, there is leadership. For any of us in this field, the value of leadership stands out and is a guiding principle. For me, there is a strong alignment between my personal needs with regard to leadership and that of my experience working in Federations, particularly with JUF the past 15 plus years. It is not just about leadership roles I have played, but recognition of how JUF exercises leadership, both locally and in the global Jewish community.

While we are big and have a broad agenda, our simple goals are to help those in need and build Jewish community. In our case, leadership means doing things that others may delight in, as well as making the tough choices that some may not understand...or even like. At JUF, we have to have the big picture in mind. That requires courage and skill. I am proud of how my colleagues and lay leadership at JUF dare to lead. We try to get it right as much as we can.

There is one value not listed on the screen worthy of mention. Jewish literacy. We are working in and serving the Jewish community. Without having an understanding of the basics of who we are as a people, a religion, and a culture, and what our texts teach us, then we lose out on the secret sauce that makes our work special. And it's never too late. Yes, I am a parent of day school kids, I went to a Jewish summer camp, have spent time in Israel and have a degree in the field. But this year, I am taking a Melton class with colleagues at work, not only to learn, but to provide some additional context for my work.

So values can be both ones you live by every day and ones you aspire to make them your own.

The final lesson, which is both a habit and a perhaps a value is the following:

How you treat others and how they feel is more important than anything else.

It is the easiest to understand, yet maybe the hardest at which to be successful.

On this topic, there is not much to say beyond this:

When all is said and done, people don't remember what you said or did. But they remember how you made them feel.

This is particularly true in the Jewish community and for the volunteers with whom we work. Steve Nasatir, the President of JUF, my boss, and someone who knows a thing or two about Jewish organizational life and leadership, says it often: It doesn't matter if we come to the greatest decision on an issue. If people don't feel good about the outcome, the process and their role in it, we didn't do our job well. And whether they are volunteers or colleagues at work...or frankly anyone in your life...how you made them feel will mean more than the accomplishments every time.

Why does it have to be so hard? Maybe because we tend to forget the habits and values and, instead, focus too much on the work.

Don't get me wrong.

The work is extremely important. We need to get it done and do it well. But we can have it all. Good habits reinforce strong values and if done well, others will feel good. A nice formula.

Someone who understood this formula is a former colleague of mine, Michael Kotzin. Michael was a longtime senior professional at JUF who passed away earlier this fall. In his book, "On the Front Lines in a Changing Jewish World," Michael reflected on what he learned about serving the Jewish community in his several decades of work. Before I conclude, I'd like to read an excerpt from his book:

"And what is it that, through these years and decades, what is it that I have learned, particularly in these last 25 years? What am I left believing about the best ways to deal with the issues that the Jewish community faces today?"

A most basic lesson, to be sure, is that, living in this world of change, we who serve the Jewish community need to stay on our toes, ready to adjust. And as tuned in as we need to be to the prevailing gestalt, we must try to take things in the directions we want to go rather than simply putting ourselves at the mercy of forces outside of ourselves. Despite the suffering the Jewish people have undergone in the past, the difficulties Jews are encountering in many places today, and the threats that Israel faces, we must not, I believe, allow ourselves to wallow in a paralyzing sense of victimhood. What the Zionist thinkers and the Zionist project have taught us is that, for our survival and our well-being, we must regard ourselves as having our destiny in our own hands and act accordingly. And we must attempt to realize that potential with wisdom and strength, acting with purpose and keeping our eyes on our goals.

Going alone with that set of principles, I have come to witness and admire the resilience of the Jewish people as they have withstood attack and lived up to the Biblical injunction to choose life. And I have learned that while virulent anti-Semitism may have returned to the world's stage and while we must protect ourselves with sound, solution-oriented tactics base on an understanding of things as they really are, not everyone is our enemy and we are not alone in this world.

Besides being important as we frame our communal strategies, this realization also means that we have obligations to others in addition to ourselves.

A conclusion I came to shortly after I started working at the Federation, as I tried to account for its success on many fronts, was that it was at once attached to earlier ways of doing things and at the same time committed to exploring new approaches. In both cases its agenda and style were driven by what needed to be done. [And] while we indeed need to take innovative steps, we also need to maintain those traditional steps which continue to work, with our goal not being to simply throw out the old and bring in the new, but rather to draw upon what is both old and new, using whichever approach (or combination of them) best satisfies the needs we are trying to address.”

Tonight we celebrate the last night of Hanukkah, the festival of lights. While the more well-known miracle of Hanukkah is about the oil lasting eight days, the other miracle is that the Jewish people, led by Judah Maccabee, got a second chance so to speak, and were able to return to the Temple and rededicate it. As we think about that miracle, we can't but help think about today. Our miracle? That here in 2015, we are privileged to serve our Jewish community, privileged to learn and privileged to chart a course for the future of the Jewish people, wherever and however we choose to serve.

And we are each privileged to be a Ben Yachid. You are each a Ben Yachid in the eyes of those who have supported you, whether it is your family, your colleagues or the folks here at Spertus, who have guided you and taught you in the program. And finally, as leaders, you are privileged to have the opportunity to go out find your own Ben Yachid - several of them - to inspire, nurture, share values, make them feel good...and carry on the traditions of Jewish leadership.

Mazel Tov to each of you. The Jewish community is lucky to have you.