

Nurturing the next generation of Jewish leaders

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By Shayna Kreisler Rabbi Mike Uram December 2, 2024

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Opinion

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In Short

Increasing access to Jewish life and nurturing the next generation of Jewish leaders are two sides of the same coin.

There is a pervasive sense today that the organized Jewish community is facing a crisis of disappearing leadership for the Jewish future. In large part, this sense of crisis is driven by declining enrollments in non-Orthodox rabbinical seminaries and in Jewish communal service training programs.

In our view, however, this sense of crisis focuses narrowly on the decline in professional leaders, while ignoring an essential form of leadership that is also critical to the Jewish future: volunteer leaders.



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A recent article published in *eJewishPhilanthropy* by Rabbis Meesh Hammer-Kossoy and Leon A. Morris of the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies (["Focusing Solely on Scale and Access Won't Cultivate Future Jewish Leadership,"](#) Nov. 14) takes the organized Jewish community to task for focusing excessively, in their opinion, on increasing access to Jewish life among laypeople instead of nurturing the next generation of rabbis and other Jewish leaders. While the next generation of rabbis and other professional Jews is essential, we cannot ignore the power and impact that critical investments in volunteer leadership can have on Jewish life.

Effective leadership, however, is not solely based on wielding power and authority. At its core, leadership is a team sport. There is no necessary contradiction between increasing access to Jewish life — as we are investing heavily in these days in the wake of Oct. 7 and the well-documented ["surge"](#) in participation in Jewish organizational life — and nurturing the next generation of Jewish leaders. Indeed, they are two sides of the same coin. Many of those who are attracted to Jewish life today, often for the first time, will be the future leaders of our communities.

The Jewish Federations of North America has long been uniquely positioned to support this transformation. We have a decades-long investment in using leadership development to build flourishing Jewish communities through cohort-based experiences including but not limited to the National Young Leadership Cabinet, the National Women's Philanthropy Board, our Changemakers program for those ages 20-25, and our local board leadership development, we empower local communities with the resources they need to cultivate innovative and successful leaders

Our nearly 30 leadership development programs across the North American community reach approximately 10,000 Jews each year. We believe this scale is necessary to develop strong and committed leaders at all levels. This commitment is not a luxury — it's a necessity for our collective resilience and success and a bulwark against the risks associated with leadership shortages. Developing leadership across all community levels prevents bottlenecks and strengthens the supply chain of capable leaders.

Leadership development is not a luxury or something we can focus on when we have time; rather it is a strategic imperative for our community to succeed in its aims. To foster a resilient and vibrant Jewish future, we need a multidimensional approach that values both depth and breadth. Breadth allows widespread access to leadership development, while depth ensures robust, skillful leadership at every level, from emerging voices to senior leaders. Accessibility and shared ownership of Jewish tradition must work in concert with structured leadership cultivation.

This holistic model also yields a significant strategic advantage: a system-wide approach can dramatically increase the impact of this type of training. In a rapidly evolving world, effective leadership requires continuous training and adaptability, clear understanding of the core values that animate leadership as well as support to help leaders deploy what they learn in the most effective ways. A coordinated, intentional framework enables leaders to respond to inevitable changes with both skill and purpose. Through shared curricular frameworks, we can equip leaders with both Jewish and secular skills to meet today's challenges.

By nurturing the next generation of leaders in both the lay leader and professional realms, we can build a broad, inclusive and enduring foundation for Jewish life and leadership.

Shayna Kreisler is the vice president of lay leadership development and Rabbi Mike Uram is the chief Jewish learning officer at the Jewish Federations of North America. Kreisler drives the strategy for developing and investing in volunteer leadership across North America, and Rabbi Uram builds Jewish learning and Jewish growth opportunities to help leaders stay inspired and achieve the greatest impact possible. Together they lead and implement strategies to strengthen Jewish leaders across communities.