Creating change in a complex system: A new perspective on the role of Central Agencies for Jewish education

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Abstract

This paper offers first a historical analysis of the role of central agencies for Jewish education in America, followed by a model of how central agencies today can best position themselves as communal change agents. When Samson Benderly founded the first Bureau of Jewish Education in New York in 1910, he envisioned it as a “lever of change” and a “laboratory of experimentation” (as cited in Gannes, 1965, p.184) for Jewish education. However, Benderly’s vision was never fully realized, due to a combination of factors, including the collapse of the New York Kehilla, and the shift in priorities of central agencies from being agents of communal change to supporting and serving Jewish organizations. For the next century, despite the important work they continued to do in areas such as teacher training, school accreditation, and resource development, central agencies were rarely seen as significant players in the field of Jewish education or as sources of leadership and innovation in their communities.

Today, as the American Jewish community navigates a severely challenging economic climate, the need for central agencies to enact Benderly’s vision is more pressing than ever. Fortunately, the insights gleaned from complexity and systems theory offer a model for how this can be accomplished. Because change agents in complex contexts often must
operate without formal authority (because there is no single authority in emergent systems) or the expectation of linear impacts (because complex systems are unpredictable), the lessons of complexity seem particularly suited for the realities of central agencies, and their challenges can become opportunities to develop unique strengths. As central agencies cannot compel action or change from their constituencies, they must become adept at mastering the skills that foster true and lasting change within systems: gathering and disseminating knowledge, creating networks and fostering connections, and envisioning and modeling new possibilities in Jewish education.

Key Words: Central Agencies, BJE, transformation, systems, complexity

Introduction

Imagine a Jewish organization whose core mission is to be a “lever of change” and a “laboratory of experimentation” for Jewish education throughout a community. Rather than simply offering a “variety of services to different educational institutions,” this organization would take on the far more ambitious task of “rais[ing] the level of Jewish education…mak[ing] radical changes in approach to Jewish education, and bring[ing] about…transformation” (Benderly, as cited in Gannes, 1965, p.184) If this sounds like a Jewish organization designed for the new century, indeed it is, except that century is not the 21st but the 20th. The above words were written by Dr. Samson Benderly almost one hundred years ago to describe his vision for the nascent Bureau of Jewish Education in New York, the first central agency for Jewish Education in the United States.

That this image of a central agency as a communal change agent is still compelling a century later speaks both to how prescient Benderly’s vision was, and how difficult it has been for central agencies (including the one Benderly founded) to make this vision a reality. At a time when a harsh economic climate has led to increased scrutiny of the effectiveness of nearly all Jewish organizations, it is particularly important to directly examine the challenges central agencies have faced over the last century and identify new directions that could revitalize those agencies today. This paper will first trace the history and perceptions of central agencies over the past hundred years from the founding of the New York BJE in 1910 through the present decade. It will then offer a new model for how central agencies can best function as change agents by drawing upon...
the contemporary fields of systems thinking and complexity theory, with illustrations from the work of one particular central agency (the organizational home of the paper’s author). As this paper will attempt to demonstrate, by seeing themselves as components of a complex system and identifying the critical points of leverage within that system, central agencies can turn perceived weaknesses into strengths, and come closer than ever to fulfilling Benderly’s compelling vision.

1910 – 1959: Origins and Evolution

The New York Bureau of Jewish Education (the surviving remnant of the short-lived New York Kehilla experiment) was founded in 1910 to fill a vacuum in Jewish communal life. Formal Jewish education for children at that time was disorganized, poorly funded, and suffering from the pressures and demands of Americanization. Benderly, his professional colleagues, and his community supporters sought to “bring order out of chaos” by creating a “lever for the study and improvement of primary Jewish education in New York City” (as cited in Gannes, 1954, p. 29). In practical terms, this would be accomplished by: “the scientific study of the facts [of Jewish education], the development of a new curriculum for the American environment, the training of leadership, the assistance given to raise standards for teachers, the preparation of new texts and the attempt to find new approaches to Jewish education” (as cited in Gannes, 1954, p. 30-31). Experimentation with “new methods and techniques” would occur in model schools which were to serve as laboratories for “setting new patterns in the educational process.” Although much of this would require direct, hands-on work by Bureau professionals, the ultimate goal was to stimulate the work of educational institutions throughout the community. As Benderly wrote, “We planned that our work should not constitute the major effort of the community for Jewish education, but rather to act as leaven, both in New York City and in the country at large...The policy of the Bureau has always been to do its work with an eye toward stimulating the work done by others” (as cited in Gannes, 1954, p. 50).

Unfortunately, Benderly’s potentially transformative vision was never fully realized. While the Bureau did a great deal of substantive work in the areas of teacher training, school supervision, and curriculum development, and while it inspired other communities around the country to create their own Bureaus and Boards of Jewish Education, it did not succeed in transforming Jewish education in New York to
the degree that its founders had envisioned. To a large extent, this was due to the failure of the broader experiment that the BJE was founded to advance – the creation of a comprehensive communal structure for the New York Jewish community known as the Kehilla. As historian Abraham Gannes writes, “The Bureau charted a wide course and experimented with the community principle on a wide front. The plan, however, was premature. It grew out of the idea of an organic Jewish community (Kehilla), but when this idea failed to materialize, and the Bureau remained an independent organization, it did not succeed in becoming the agency responsible for Jewish education on a community-wide basis” (1954, p. 32).

Although it was the pioneer in the field, The New York BJE also eventually changed its course in reaction to the other central agencies subsequently founded across the country. These agencies developed a very different model for a Jewish community agency that was grounded in two ideas: the central agency as primarily a source of service and support for Jewish schools, rather than a “lever of change” for Jewish education; and the highest ideal for communal Jewish education being “unity in diversity” (Gannes, 1954, p. 38)

Much of the impetus for turning to the service model grew out of the reality that, unlike public Boards of Education, central agencies had no authority over the institutions with which they worked. Thus, as Jonathan Woocher indicates, unless they could offer services that were clearly and immediately useful to these schools and synagogues, the institutions would have no incentive to follow their lead or grant access to their teachers and students (private communication, 5 July, 2009).

At the same time, central agencies faced an increasing shift of supplementary Jewish education from community-based Talmud Torahs to synagogue schools, institutions which are by definition shaped by and responsible to particular denominations. This led to the idea of “unity in diversity” (Gannes, 1954, p.38), as expressed in the official “Principles of Policy of the Chicago Board of Jewish Education” in 1923:

*In all of our work we must avoid imposing any one type of Judaism or any one program of Jewish education upon all schools affiliated with us. We are strictly a non-partisan Board, reflecting the interest of Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Zionist and non-Zionist Jews. While there is a fundamental unity in all Jewish education, and certain common basic subjects of instruction, nevertheless in emphasis, in arrangement of curriculum, in the selection of teachers, we are to act in the capacity of advisors. The final determination in all of these*
matters must remain with the local group – the congregation and its rabbi. (Gannes, 1954, p. 40).

As synagogues gained stature and denominationalism became a stronger force, central agencies increasingly felt that their role was to provide, in the words of Gannes,

“a unifying educational force in each community if the community was not to be split up into many segments. This led to the practical acceptance of the idea of servicing all existing educational groups without interfering with their ideological and religious philosophies” (p. 42).

It also, however, led to an increasing reluctance to espouse any specific form of Jewish education, to experiment with new models, or to recommend any “best practices” for fear of alienating educational institution that chose to follow a different path.

Once the service and unity models were established, they drove the work of central agencies for the next decades. Writing in 1954, Gannes lamented that “the community educational agency has lost sight of the ‘lever’ idea (experimentation) of the first Bureau of Jewish Education, which should be the core of its program” (p. 49). Instead, central agencies focused most of their efforts on teacher training, running Hebrew high schools, gathering basic data on population size, school enrollment, and encouraging cooperation and joint activities between the various schools, synagogues, JCCs, and other Jewish organizations in a given community (p. 49). Gannes cataloged what he felt had been the central agencies’ main achievements at mid-century: establishing Jewish education as a communal responsibility; bringing disparate schools and organizations together to create a “respectable” system of Jewish education; offering a central “address and clearing house” for Jewish education within a community; and consistently manifesting “optimism, faith, vision and confidence in the possibilities of Jewish education” (pp. 95-87).

1960-2001: Visions and Challenges

Over the next half-century, central agencies of Jewish education in America repeatedly confronted the gap between visions of what these organizations could be, and the challenging realities of Jewish communal life that often limited their roles and impact. This tension can be traced in the pages of The Journal of Jewish Education, which first addressed the topic in a substantive way in 1965 and has revisited it approximately
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every ten years thereafter. Reading the articles on central agencies as a corpus reveals how consistent both the challenges and the proposed solutions have been throughout the decades. In 1965, Isaac Toubin, executive director of the American Association for Jewish Education (precursor to JESNA), described the weaknesses of central agencies as he viewed them:

*The major function of the Bureau [of Jewish Education] seldom goes beyond the elementary school level, and even here its role is often that of passive observer and timid counselor. Examples of vigorous Bureaus, well financed, with adequate staff and services, possessing authority to take initiative and embracing all schools of the community are rare indeed. Is it any wonder, then, that a large number of Bureau executives consider their agencies to be in a state of crisis? (p. 192)*

What is so striking about Toubin’s words is that they could have been written at practically any time throughout the 20th century. In 1975, David Rudavsky, Professor of Hebrew Culture and Education at New York University, lamented that although central agencies had made progress in terms of organizational solidity, overall they were “lacking in a vision, and are sorely in need of one to stimulate or inspire us to counter the frustration or disillusionment from which [they] suffer” (p. 6). By 1990, the perception of central agencies had deteriorated to the point where communal leaders and scholars were openly debating whether they were necessary at all. Political scientist Daniel Elazar gave his pessimistic assessment of the relevance and future of central agencies:

*The question must now be asked: Are central agencies for Jewish education needed at all? The answer to that question must be blunt. They are only if they can make themselves needed to today’s important Jewish education constituencies... With a few exceptions, the BJE’s have no strong constituencies. Even in their best days, the congregational schools often saw them as a burdensome imposition from the outside or an imposed nuisance.... (1990, p. 9)*

Even the renewed attention many communities gave to Jewish education and “Jewish continuity” in the 1990’s (following in the wake of the 1990 Jewish population study) did not seem to translate into enhanced status for central agencies. As Chaim Lauer, director of the BJE of New York, wrote in 2001, “There has been a great deal of communal fanfare and effort about Jewish education over the last ten years. One could have expected local central agencies for Jewish education (BJEs)
to play – or, at least, be invited to play – active roles in the process. This has not happened. In many cases, the opposite has occurred.” (p. 64).

Not every assessment of the work of central agencies was as uniformly negative. Jeffery Lasday, director of the St. Louis Central Agency for Jewish Education, believed that by 2001, “through overcoming many of the central challenges of the 1990’s, central agencies today have been able to overcome adversity and regain their leadership role in Jewish education” (p. 22). However, the evidence he cited – closer ties with Federations, increased funding, and an expanded focus beyond congregational schools – seemed to suggest at best incremental changes during the 20th century, not a fundamental transformation of the role or status of central agencies in the community.

Educational leaders’ suggestions for changing central agencies reveal what they felt was lacking in these institutions and why they had often been perceived as marginal players in Jewish communal life. Some proposals, echoing Lasday’s assessment, argued for improving and expanding current roles: more and better teacher training, expansion from a sole focus on congregational education into camping, youth groups, and adult education, better use of technologies, etc. Others focused on addressing the external factors that impeded the functioning of central agencies – lack of sufficient funding, low status in the community, and reluctance of other communal agencies to act as partners – although it is not quite clear whether these factors were the cause or the effect of central agencies’ mediocrity.

Still others, however, envisioned a new kind of central agency that could provide vision, planning, and knowledge for a community, and thus become a true central address for Jewish education. Sara Lee, Director of the Rhea Hirsch School of Education at Hebrew Union College, wrote in 1990 that central agencies must act on their potential as the “conveners, networkers, and facilitators of communitywide educational efforts that include schools, but include many other institutions as well.” To do so, the agencies would have to “develop the planning and research capacities required for communitywide development of Jewish education,” something that would require a fundamental shift in the “mindscape” of the agency and its leaders (pp. 13-14). Barbara Steinberg, then Executive Director of the Commission for Jewish Education of the Palm Beaches, similarly exhorted central agencies to become sources of vision, expertise, and planning for their communities:

*Bureaus must take a leadership role in providing their communities with a vision of Jewish education – and of Jewish life – that will create*
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a climate in which Jewish learning and living can flourish. Bureaus must assume high visibility in community activities; provide think tank opportunities for dreaming and problem solving; [and] create planning processes that involve the entire Jewish community, no matter how difficult that is. (1990, p. 48)

Finally, Chaim Lauer, writing optimistically in the present tense to describe what was in reality still only a future potential, offered his vision for how central agencies could be “change agents” within the field of Jewish education:

By the choices they help make, the consensus they help develop, and through the priorities they stress, central agencies are the systemic change agents that communities need to be proactive, responsive and state-of-the-art in the areas of Jewish education and renewal. They tailor general knowledge and procedures to local Jewish needs and priorities. They are where Community and Curriculum merge. (2001, p. 70)

New Directions: Complexity and Change

During the first decade of the 21st century, many central agencies around the country have worked towards increasing their relevancy and impact within their communities and the Jewish education field as a whole. In a 2008 report, JESNA framed the recent work of central agencies around the idea of “linking silos” (Wertheimer, 2005, p. 2) in Jewish education, bringing together institutions, professionals, and programs to create a more systematic approach to serving the needs of the Jewish community. Some of the noteworthy initiatives cited by the report include: multi-synagogue congregational education initiatives in Hartford, CT and Philadelphia; the Jewish Teen Alliance of San Francisco, a task force of program providers, lay leaders, teens, and funders that plans and coordinates outreach to teens throughout the community; the concierge program in Los Angeles, in which Jewish professionals offer counseling and referral services that help families find and take advantage of educational settings and resources that are well-suited to their needs and interests; Cleveland’s creation of “two new family educator positions in preschools to serve as ‘bus drivers’ linking families to additional Jewish involvements during and following preschool”; and the myriad of professional networks among educators in multiple Jewish communities across the country (Belzer, 2008, p. 19).

Today, as the American Jewish community, along with the rest of
the nation, navigates a severely challenging economic climate, the need for central agencies to enact Benderly’s vision is more pressing than ever. The bad news for central agencies is that even as communal resources shrink, many of them face the same challenges of support, legitimacy, and authority that plagued them throughout the 20th century. As long as central agencies are viewed as primarily providing service and support to a limited range of mostly mediocre Jewish educational programs (to encapsulate the typical image and stereotype of a “BJE”) it will be nearly impossible to demonstrate why such agencies should continue to receive communal funding. Fortunately, only a handful of communities have, at this writing, reached the drastic conclusion that their central agencies are no longer necessary. Yet we know that many more are teetering on the edge, as communal leaders carefully weigh the value of central agencies against the needs of the numerous other Jewish educational and social service organizations that seek the community’s limited funds.

Countering this gloomy picture, however, is the fact that the field of Jewish education has been revitalized in the past two decades by innovations and insights that have created an environment ripe for central agencies to take a new role in their communities. Advances in research and thought both within and outside of the Jewish world have given us new understandings of what it takes to become a “systemic change agent” (Lauer, 2001, p. 70) in a complex system such as the one comprised of Jewish institutions, professionals, educators, and learners. The field of complexity theory emerged in the later decades of the twentieth century as a useful and popular way to conceptualize systems and organizations of all kinds, from businesses to schools to entire communities. Jonathan Woocher, then President (and now Chief Ideas Officer) of JESNA, was the first to suggest that complexity theory could be used as a framework for understanding Jewish education and its structural components. In 1999, at a gathering of educational leaders within the Reform Movement, Woocher identified the characteristics of complex systems that are most relevant to the behaviors of Jewish institutions, educators and learners: the ways in which small actions or factors (such as a particular curricular choice) can have broad and unpredictable impacts, wholes being more than the sum of their parts (such as in a synagogue or a school), the influence of networks and “attractors” (such as charismatic leaders) on the paths of individuals, and the necessity of learning and knowledge for successful adaptation (1999, p. 7).

Since that time, a number of thinkers in the fields of education
and organizational change have explored further how individuals and institutions can affect change within a complex system. Because change agents in complex contexts often must operate without formal authority (since there is no single authority in emergent systems) and with no expectation of linear, immediate impacts (because complex systems are multi-dimensional and unpredictable), the lessons of complexity seem particularly suited for the realities of central agencies. Within this framework the challenges faced by central agencies become opportunities to develop distinctive strengths. Because central agencies cannot compel action or change from their constituencies, they must become uniquely adept at mastering the very skills that foster true and lasting change within systems: gathering and disseminating knowledge, creating networks and fostering connections, and envisioning and modeling new possibilities in Jewish education. In other words, to become true agents of change, central agencies must re-envision their role in their communities and develop their potential to inform, involve, and inspire.

Inform: Creating and Sharing Knowledge

In a living system, knowledge and information aren’t merely useful tools; they are the very medium through which change occurs. In the book *Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed* – an exploration of the complex and unpredictable nature of social change – the authors illustrate the role of knowledge as a powerful social force through the example of a nomadic Ethiopian tribe who quite literally rely on knowledge for survival:

*The Afaris believe it is a sacred responsibility to listen and share dagu – a word that means information, though it implies more than pure data. The Afaris are nomadic cattle herders, and they have existed for thousands of years in a harsh environment where most nomadic tribes have been wiped out. They claim that dagu is the secret to their longevity. “Dagu is life” is an Afari expression.*

*…The exchange of dagu trumps all other responsibilities. [The Afaris] share what they have seen or heard about the environment, about health issues (both cattle and human), about political tensions, about new relationships. As they talk, they provide the facts as they have seen them or heard them, but also their interpretation of what these facts mean. They collectively make sense of the patterns that are emerging… The Afaris do not believe that they can control the patterns, but that if they can understand them deeply, they can work within them and*
potentially nudge them or influence them. (Westley, Zimmerman, & Patton, 2007, pp. 133-134)

As the patterns of Jewish life today constantly and rapidly shift and evolve, the Jewish world needs to be as attuned to these patterns as the Afari are to the world around them. To this end, generating, analyzing, and disseminating knowledge are critical roles that central agencies can play to maximize the chances that we can positively influence the patterns unfolding around us. The Partnership for Jewish Life and Learning – the central agency in Greater Washington DC – has created a Research and Evaluation Division that works both internally with the agency’s programming areas and initiatives, and externally with professionals and organizations throughout the community. The impetus for devoting significant resources to research and evaluation – a fairly unusual choice for a central agency – is the belief that knowledge cannot be adequately embedded in the communal culture through national research efforts alone. National research centers and studies have provided invaluable data and insights about the Jewish community and the contexts in which Jewish education occurs. However, they are limited by their necessary distance from the local communities and environments where Jewish life actually takes place. They provide a 30,000 foot view of the Jewish world, with at best an occasional snapshot of any given community or institution.

A community-based center for research and evaluation, in contrast, can study a single community over time and from multiple perspectives, and offer a portrait of its Jewish life with far greater depth and nuance. Also, by creating ongoing relationships between research/evaluation professionals and Jewish education practitioners and policy makers, a central agency can help ensure that research actually informs work on the ground rather than sitting unexamined on a bookshelf. Such a body can verify that evaluation is seen not as a “report card,” but rather as a valuable opportunity for learning and growth. Although, as will be explored more fully in the next section, knowledge is generated from the myriad connections and relationships that exist throughout a community, a central agency is uniquely positioned to help a community understand the patterns that emerge from seemingly disconnected bits of information, and thereby to enable them to turn data into meaning.

Involve: Fostering Connections

Although central agencies can and should play a key role in gathering,
analyzing and disseminating knowledge in order to effect change, the
description of the Afari above illustrates the fact that knowledge and
insight often emerge not from a single mind working in isolation, but
from the collective power of many creative minds working towards the
same goal. In the words of organizational consultant Margaret Wheatley
(whose work is largely informed by complexity and systems theory):

*Living systems create their own solutions. Somewhere in the system are
people already practicing a solution that others think is impossible. Or
they possess information that could help many others….To find these
solutions, the system needs to connect to more of itself…It is crucial to
remember that, in organizations [and communities], we are working
with webs of relationships…[Within these webs] we need processes to
help us weave connections, to discover shared interests, to listen to one
another’s stories and dreams. We need processes that take advantage
of our natural ability to network, to communicate when something is
meaningful to us. We need processes that invite us to participate, that
honor our creativity and commitment.* (2007, pp. 106-107)

With its links to Jewish professionals, leaders and institutions across
a community, a central agency can help weave the web of connection
that is so critical to the health and momentum of living systems. One
particularly effective model for this is the community of practice, a
concept that took root first in the business and general education worlds
and is now becoming increasingly common among Jewish educators.
Communities of practice, as defined by sociologist Ettienne Wegner (who
developed the concept), are “groups of people who share a concern, a set
of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge
and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger,
McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p.4). The key words in this definition
are “knowledge” and “interacting,” as communities of practice are
grounded in the theory that knowledge is socially constructed and thus
gained not only through formal study, but through “informal learning
processes such as storytelling, conversation, coaching and apprenticeship
of the kind that communities of practice provide” (Wenger et al., p. 9).
This kind of social learning has, of course, been going on for as long as
human history. Today, however, as our society and our work becomes
increasingly atomized, the kind of social learning that once happened
naturally must be carefully orchestrated and cultivated. Although
Judaism is rooted in community, our Jewish professionals and educators
often work in isolation, with little opportunity for individual day school
or congregational school or youth educators to connect with and learn from their professional peers.

Fostering these kinds of connections and communities is a natural and imperative role for central agencies. More such institutions around the country are working to either create or strengthen professional networks and communities of practice for the educators in their regions. Using Washington again as an example, the central agency has put cultivating communities of practice at the center of its professional development work, as it creates, facilitates, and advises such communities among early childhood directors, adult Jewish educators, youth educators and congregational education directors. A recent professional development workshop for teachers in congregational schools revealed that these educators also sought greater connections to same-grade-level teachers in other congregations, and as a result the Partnership will help the education directors create listservs and other means of connection, some of which will hopefully also evolve into true knowledge-sharing communities.

A second and related role for central agencies is that of modeling the use of technology to attract, connect and involve Jews throughout the community, and indeed throughout the world as technology makes geographic barriers obsolete. Most central agencies are just at the beginning of this process, as they and the technology evolve together. In the near future, however, we could easily see: a community’s Jewish professionals gathering at the central agency to study with master educators in Israel through live, interactive “webinars”; congregational and day school educators exploring the latest Hebrew-instruction software and web resources in a central agency’s computer lab; adult education classes, lectures, and seminars being videoed and presented as podcasts and “vidcasts” available for viewing and downloading from the central agency website; and central agency-sponsored interactive websites with engaging and relevant content for all segments of the Jewish community – young children and teen-agers, parents, seniors, and others.

While technology will never replace face-to-face learning and interaction, it offers a powerful tool for widening the reach and scope of Jewish education. The interactive nature of technology also helps ensure that knowledge sharing is not a unidirectional process, with professional educators as the sole “content providers” and community members as merely a passive audience. As central agencies seek to provide new educational directions to their community, they can now harness
technology to, as Margaret Wheatley advocates, “involve everybody who cares” in the change process:

*The simple fact is that we can’t design anything that works without the involvement of all those it affects. None of us is smart enough these days to know what will work for others… We can’t force anybody to change. We can only involve them in the change process from the beginning and see what’s possible. If change becomes meaningful to them, they will change. If we want their support, we must welcome them as co-creators.* (2007, pp. 110-111)

**Inspire: Envisioning and Modeling Innovation**

As the above quote declares, in addition to inviting people to be co-creators in change, we have to make them feel that the change we seek is meaningful and valuable. In other words, true, lasting change occurs not through imposition, but through inspiration. Or, to put it in slightly more provocative terms: “Living systems cannot be directed along a linear path… The challenge is to disturb them in a manner that approximates the desired outcome” (Pascale, Milleman, & Gioja, 2002, p. 6). “Disturb” might seem an odd word to use under the heading of “inspiring” change, but as we instinctively know, disturbing and challenging the status quo is inherent in the process of innovation – thus “inspiring” and “disturbing” are often two sides of the same coin. The business expert Clayton Christensen, in his classic work *The Innovator’s Dilemma*, similarly referred to innovations as “disruptive technologies.” True innovations, he proclaims, are disruptive to existing institutions, markets and customers because they often require a complete paradigm shift in order to appreciate their value and commit to the changes they bring (2000, p.xv). The authors of *Getting to Maybe* use an even more vivid image, applying a classic economic term to natural ecosystem, for the dramatic impact of innovation: “creative destruction.” A forest fire might seem to be the death of a forest, but in fact clearing away dead wood can be the avenue to new growth and continued life. The authors caution that, “Change…is always difficult. It often means stopping doing something that we have done for years… But the adaptive cycle tells us that unless we release the resources of time, energy, money and skill locked up in our routines and our institutions on a regular basis, it is hard to create anything new or to look at things from a different perspective” (Westley et. al., 2007, p. 68).

There is arguably no area in Jewish education more in need
of “creative destruction” and a paradigm shift than congregational/supplemental education. In the past central agencies have suffered because they were so closely associated with a form of Jewish education that was widely perceived as mediocre at best, and a failure at worst. Today central agencies have the opportunity to turn this once negative association on its head by leveraging their longstanding relationships with congregations and religious schools to affect dramatic change where it is most needed. One such effort is underway in the Washington area, where the central agency is leading an initial cohort of six congregations in an initiative entitled “CE21 – Congregational Education for the 21st Century.” CE21 seeks to create disruptive technologies in the educational systems of these congregations by encouraging a systemic transformation from a schooling model to a learning model. Rather than being centered on a classroom-based program that is largely removed from students’ experience and that usually ends when children “graduate” at thirteen, congregational education would ideally be an integrated system in which congregants of all ages have multiple opportunities for Jewish learning that connect Jewish values, texts, and teachings to what is most important and meaningful in learners’ lives.

Each of the participants in CE21 has gone through an extensive process to define the culture and values of their congregation, and create a vision of the congregation’s future in which these goals of universal learning and engagement can be met. Over the next six months the congregations will develop concrete models of innovative new learning structures which will be implemented in the fall of 2010. By then, a second cohort of congregations will be launching their visioning process, the new models of the first cohort will have been monitored and evaluated, and the lessons learned from the entire initiative will have been compiled, analyzed, and shared with the community and nationwide. In that way, the educational innovations within one local group of congregations can disturb the system of congregational education enough to send ripple effects throughout the entire field. Undoubtedly the process will not be smooth; already the congregations have had to anticipate and address internal concerns and doubts about the changes they wish to bring about. Reinventing the religious school may indeed feel to some like “destruction” (creative or not) of an institution that was at least familiar and predictable, if not especially effective. But with the central agency as the hub of this initiative – offering planning, guidance, expertise, encouragement, and vision – the congregations will have an entire system supporting them and continuing to offer inspiration when
and where it is most needed.

Another area in which central agencies can inspire/disturb the system in positive ways is in adult Jewish education. While most communities offer numerous learning opportunities for adults through synagogues, JCCs, and independent organizations, adult learning as a field lags behind other areas of Jewish education in terms of infrastructure, quality control, and connections among individual program providers. In addition, as technology changes the ways in which people today acquire knowledge, make meaning, and create community, adult Jewish learning providers and practitioners must seek out new venues and modalities in order to keep pace with learners’ needs and expectations. Strengthening adult Jewish education therefore requires creating a community-wide infrastructure to support and enhance the learning opportunities and institutions that already exist, while at the same time developing new prototypes that take advantage of the latest educational tools and technologies.

Central agencies are the natural force within a community to fill these gaps. As discussed in the previous section, expanding boundaries and connections through technology should be a focus of every central agency. In addition to providing web-based learning opportunities such as podcasts and virtual study groups, central agency websites could provide a searchable clearinghouse and database of all adult Jewish education offerings in a given community. This would enable learners and potential learners to access up-to-date information about courses and events and raise awareness among institutions and organizations about each others’ work, thus facilitating communication and collaboration among them. As an example of one program designed to enhance the quality and consistency of adult Jewish education, the central agency in Washington has created a corps of Partnership Teaching Fellows, early-career professionals selected for their demonstrated and potential teaching and leadership abilities. These educators are teaching high-quality introductory and advanced Jewish education courses throughout the community, building their skills through a community of practice and mentorships with veteran educators, and developing new curricula to bring to the field at large. As with CE21, it is expected that their work – initially on a relatively small scale – will have exponential effects, as these educators model, promote and inspire excellence in adult Jewish learning throughout the region.
Conclusion: From Lever to Leaven

In describing what he hoped to accomplish with the BJE of New York at the beginning of the last century, Samson Benderly used two evocative metaphors. He spoke of the BJE as both a “lever for... improvement” and as the “leaven” that would allow the Jewish institutions of New York to thrive (Gannes, 1954, p.29; p. 50). Although these might both seem to be useful metaphors for the work of any central agency, in that they describe an object or substance that is an agent of change, in fact the second is far more meaningful for central agencies today. A lever exerts force and creates movement, but the object acted upon remains fundamentally the same, just in a different position. Leaven, in contrast, completely transforms separate ingredients – such as flour, eggs, and water – into a new and far more appealing entity. In addition, the lever remains distinct from the object it moves, while the leaven is thoroughly integrated into the substance it creates. As the authors of Getting to Maybe remind us, “We don’t stand outside the complex system we are trying to change: when it changes, we do; when we change, it does.” (Westley et al., 2007, p. 46). To be effective agents of change in their communities, central agencies must avoid attempts to act as levers rather than leaven – to desist from trying to impose movement or change on reluctant people and institutions rather than seeding the change by providing knowledge, vision and resources that others will wish to embrace. This reality is slowly beginning to be understood. In the last few years the central agencies in Washington, Los Angeles, and Rhode Island each redrafted their mission statements to include the idea of acting as a catalyst in their communities.

There are those who would argue that a central agency is in fact too “central,” too embedded in the status quo, to be an agent of change. A recent report exploring the “innovation ecosystem” created by Jewish start-ups over the past decade argues that

The Jewish communal infrastructure of the last century was built to unify, centralize, and coordinate the fragmented landscape of... Jewish organizational life in America... Where the unity-focused system of the twentieth century sought to bring together a diversity of individuals in a single organization, the innovative ecosystem fosters a diversity of organizations that serve specific interests, or niches. (Innovation Ecosystem, 2009, p. 5)

While the vitality and creativity that many of these new
organizations have brought to Jewish life is evident, by arguing that innovation primarily occurs through organizations with specific niches or interests, they misunderstand the nature of change in a complex system. It is precisely because they are embedded within networks of programs, practitioners, and institutions that central agencies can catalyze the kinds of connections from which the most resonant and lasting innovations have the potential to emerge. By focusing on infusing knowledge into the system, connecting the system to itself, and creatively “disrupting” that system by providing inspiring models of vision and innovation, a central agency can help create a healthy, living Jewish community, in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, each dimension is linked by a shared sense of mission and purpose, and the entire system works in concert to adapt, innovate, and thrive.

References


