

The Remaking of Hillel: A Case Study on Leadership and Organizational Transformation

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Case Analysis
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Every effort has been made to present this story objectively. Facts were carefully checked to ensure accuracy. If any omissions, distortions or errors remain, they are the sole responsibility of the author.

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Introduction

All nonprofits have to manage issues related to leadership and succession, change, innovation, strategic alliances, stakeholder relations, governance, organizational design and organizational culture. In its recent history, Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life has addressed these issues in ways that can be instructive for other organizations. This Hillel case study has been written to offer insights into the dilemmas and challenges faced by leaders of nonprofit organizations.

Toward Organizational Effectiveness in the Jewish Sector

Thousands of local, regional and national organizations serve the needs of the Jewish population in the United States. These organizations, comprising the Jewish sector of the American economy,¹ exist for a variety of purposes and meet a variety of needs — religious, cultural, educational, social service, philanthropic, political, fraternal, recreational, and social.

Despite their religious/ethnic focus, organizations in the Jewish sector are similar to organizations in the nonprofit sector with respect to fundamental

issues of leadership and management. To achieve their aims and satisfy stakeholders, all nonprofit organizations need both effective leadership and adequate financial resources. One need only pick up a newspaper for illustrations of the problems and failures that ensue when either leadership or finances are deficient. Thus, the intersection of organizational need, leadership, philanthropy and fundraising represents perhaps the most critical area of inquiry for improving organizational effectiveness in the nonprofit sector.

However, in spite of the existence of an extensive body of knowledge for improving organizational effectiveness in nonprofits,² it is surprising how little attention has been paid to making organizations in the Jewish sector more effective. One of the most common ways of improving organizational effectiveness is through management training, but data indicate that only about a quarter of those who hold high-level positions in the Jewish sector have participated in a professional development program.³ Another way is through articles and books. However, a literature search reveals that virtually nothing has been written about this topic for the Jewish sector.

¹ For a recent study on the Jewish sector, see Kelner, Rabkin, Saxe and Sheingold (2005).

² For a recent example, see Light (2004).

³ This figure comes from re-analysis of the data in Kelner et al. (2004) by Shaul Kelner.

The Hillel case study represents an initial attempt to fill this gap. It has been written for several audiences. It is intended to help leaders in the Jewish sector think about organizational decision-making, with a special emphasis on fundraising and philanthropy. It has also been written for those who teach about Jewish organizations and nonprofits in universities and continuing education programs, and for scholars of the nonprofit sector. With this latter audience in mind, every attempt has been made to clarify terminology and provide background for the reader who is unfamiliar with the Jewish sector.

About Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life

Hillel is widely regarded as one of the more effective, well-managed and progressive organizations in the Jewish sector, although as recently as the late 1980s this was not the case.⁴ Hillel's current mission is to "enrich the lives of Jewish undergraduate and graduate students so that they may enrich the Jewish people and the world."⁵ To accomplish this mission, Hillel's International Center in Washington, D.C. supports more than 250 affiliates that serve the needs of Jewish university students in the United States, Canada, Latin America, Australia, Israel, and the states of the former Soviet Union. Hillel's current international budget is \$60 million. Over \$34 million of this amount is raised through grants and contributions.⁶

Hillel's eighty-plus year history exemplifies the focus of this case study — the intersection of organizational need, leadership, philanthropy and

fundraising. The themes that are addressed here can be traced back to the organization's founding at the University of Illinois in 1923, when a professor and a businessman launched the first Hillel foundation and recruited a young, charismatic rabbi to lead it. The fledgling organization, which started in a room over a barbershop, struggled for resources. It eventually acquired funding through the efforts of its leader, with the support of his new board and through partnerships with other Jewish leaders and organizations. Hillel took on the new name of B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation shortly after its creation when it received generous support from B'nai B'rith, then a well-funded and well-regarded Jewish fraternal organization with a strong service orientation. The organization grew rapidly under the leadership of a series of dedicated rabbis and academic scholars.

Although Hillel built new facilities and expanded onto additional campuses, it also experienced a continuous struggle for adequate funding over the years, developing complicated financial dependencies on B'nai B'rith and on local Jewish community federations.⁷ In the 1980s, the financial situation became acute as its organizational relations with B'nai B'rith went into decline. Programs were curtailed and student attendance stagnated. Inadequate resources made it difficult for the organization to attract rabbis to lead local campus foundations, and a number of dedicated rabbis who had been leading local Hillels left to pursue other opportunities. Those who stayed were highly dissatisfied with the organization's national leadership. The wider Jewish communal world had a poor opinion of Hillel, was not interested in

⁴ See Abramowitz (1995).

⁵ The mission statement was changed in 2005.

⁶ Dollar figures are taken from Hillel's 2004 annual report (Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, 2004).

⁷ Like the United Way, federations are centralized organizations in local Jewish communities. They engage in fundraising and make allocations to Israel and to a variety of domestic agencies and organizations. Prior to 1999, the Council of Jewish Federations was the coordinating body for federations across the United States and Canada. This coordinating body is now called the United Jewish Communities.

funding it, and did not see college students as a group deserving of support. Israel, Soviet and Ethiopian Jewry, and the poor were the primary beneficiaries of available resources.

When Richard Joel, who was neither an insider nor a rabbi, became the surprise choice as International Director in 1988, he inherited these problems and set about transforming the organization. Joel articulated a defining vision of what Hillel could become and developed a strategy to implement his vision, involving stakeholders at every stage. Many changes were necessary. College students were being ignored by the Jewish community and were not being recognized as the future of American Jewry. Hillel directors on campus — most of whom were rabbis — were not receiving sufficient support from the national office. In many cases, the services they provided to students were in need of improvement and their individual efforts were not aligned with the mission of the national office. Hillel's national office was financially dependent upon B'nai B'rith and was not providing adequate leadership for the national movement. The Council of Jewish Federations and local federations did not view Hillel as the central Jewish address on campus and did not provide enough support to Hillel at the local, regional, and national levels. Philanthropists did not appreciate the organization's mission and were not directing their resources to the organization so that it could achieve its mission.

From 1988 to 1995 Joel succeeded in changing all of these arenas and remade the organization, dramatically changing both its reputation in the Jewish communal world and its presence on

campuses. According to his associates, he accomplished this through a combination of shrewd political maneuvering, disarming candor, artful language, sophisticated strategic thinking and charisma. One additional factor was his singular talent at developing friendships and alliances with influential individuals who were moved to embrace his vision and help him implement it. When Joel started in 1988, Hillel's annual budget was \$14 million. By the time he left in 2003 to become the president of Yeshiva University in New York, the budget had quadrupled.

Joel's efforts were aided by the findings of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey that found a dramatic rise in the intermarriage rate among Jews over the previous twenty years. This study changed the orientation of the Jewish community as "Jewish continuity" became a compelling concern. Providing services to Jewish college students was suddenly viewed as an important way to ensure the future of American Jewry and reverse the trends toward assimilation. Joel capitalized on this development and convinced the Jewish community that Hillel could provide a solution.

Method

The material in this case study is based on interviews, reports, memos, speeches, press releases, periodicals and other documents.⁸

Beginning in 2001, extensive personal interviews were conducted with 26 key individuals associated with Hillel, B'nai B'rith, the Council of Jewish Federations, and philanthropic foundations. The interviews emphasized the period from 1988 to 1995. Several individuals who were familiar with

⁸ See Appendix A for a list of interviewees and a details about the method used in writing the case study.

the organization's history generated the initial list of interviewees. Additional names were subsequently added at the recommendation of interviewees. Quotations in the text of this case study not accompanied by a footnote are taken from transcripts of these interviews.

Outline of the Case

Although the story told herein has been skillfully presented elsewhere,⁹ this case study provides greater depth and presents the story behind the story. It offers an account of the transformation of a stagnant nonprofit into a thriving international organization.

The case is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1: Hillel's Rabbinic Culture (1923–1988) begins with Hillel's founding, continues with a brief narrative of its early years and early leaders, and then presents an in-depth description of Hillel's development from the 1960s through the 1980s to set the stage for Richard Joel's arrival. During this period, many Jewish students stayed away from Hillel, the organization was troubled by labor problems and its growth was hampered as a consequence of its entanglements with and between local federations and its parent organization, B'nai B'rith. Toward the latter part of the 1980s, a search for a new International Director began.

Chapter 2: New Leader, New Vision (1988–1992) begins with Richard Joel's first days in the position and describes the problems and challenges he inherited and needed to address. It discusses his new vision for the organization, his efforts to bring about change, and his attempts to convince both internal and external stakeholders that change was needed, not just for the benefit of college students, but for the benefit of the entire Jewish community.

Chapter 3: Realizing the Vision (1992–1995) explains how Richard Joel was able to implement his vision despite a financial crisis brought about by a precipitous decline in allocations from B'nai B'rith. Forced to find new funding, he established relationships with private philanthropists, worked behind the scenes to change the longstanding system of allocations from the federations and established a new development function. At the same time, he created an entirely new legal entity that enabled Hillel to become fully independent of B'nai B'rith.

A Brief Note About Case Studies¹⁰

A case is a factual description of historical events. Case studies have been used widely in a variety of fields to enhance learning as well as to link theory and practice. Few cases, however, have been written about Jewish organizations. Our intent here is to fill this gap and to foster new learning, as Jewish organizations are simultaneously similar to and different from other nonprofits. Our intent is also to help enhance Jewish organizations through the study of such cases.

Case studies have been written in a number of different formats. One format used widely in business schools is known as the “decision focus” case, in which the reader is given a series of facts and is placed in the role of decision-maker. Having the reader simulate a leadership role gives this format pedagogical advantages over other formats. However, such cases are generally limited to a single decision.

The story of Hillel, in contrast, concerns the cumulative effects of a series of decisions, actions, and events over the course of seven years that

⁹ See Rubin (2000) and Rubin (2003).

¹⁰ The material in this section is derived from Naumes and Naumes (1999).

essentially culminated in a new organization. We have therefore written the story of Richard Joel and Hillel as an “evaluative” case, using a format in which a series of events are described. This approach provides the reader with an opportunity to evaluate the various choices made by the actors in the story and to develop theoretical interpretations of the events.

The Case Analysis by Amy Sales, Director of the Fisher-Bernstein Institute for Jewish Philanthropy and Leadership at Brandeis University, offers lessons that can be derived from the case and presents some of these theoretical interpretations.

Chapter 1:

Hillel's Rabbinic Culture — 1923 to 1988

A New Organization for Jewish College Students¹¹

The first Hillel foundation, established in 1923 at the University of Illinois, came into being as a result of the vision and efforts of three people: Professor Edward Chauncey Baldwin, a Christian professor of English at the university who taught a course on literature and the Bible; Isaac Kuhn, a local business owner devoted to the needs of Jewish students; and Benjamin Frankel, who was ordained as a rabbi that year.

Jewish enrollment in the nation's universities began to increase at the beginning of the 20th century, and the Jewish community of Champaign-Urbana, like those of other university towns, took an interest in local Jewish students. In comparison to other campuses, Jewish student life at the University of Illinois was relatively lively prior to Hillel's founding. As early as 1907 small groups of Jewish students at the university began meeting regularly through a club called Ivrim, and Jewish fraternities and sororities began to be established at the school. In 1912 Ivrim went national, becoming part of the Menorah Society, an organization with an intellectual orientation started at Harvard. At

one point, nearly half of the Jewish students on campus were members. Still, there was a great deal of ignorance and apathy among Jewish students, and many knew little about their heritage. By the early 1920s, Professor Baldwin, frustrated at the ignorance he encountered among the Jewish students in his classes, began to make a case for a Jewish campus center that would be much more than just a student club. Campus ministries had already been created at the school for Methodist, Episcopalian, and Catholic students.

With the financial support of Kuhn and the Chicago Board of Rabbis, Baldwin was able to secure a year of funding to pay Frankel. Frankel was an Illinois native who, while finishing his rabbinical studies at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, had been serving as a rabbinic intern at Temple Sinai in Champaign, Illinois. The plan was for Frankel to split his time between the campus and the synagogue. It was Frankel who came up with the name Hillel Foundation for the new organization, inspired by a first-century Jewish rabbi renowned for his learning and compassion.

Hillel started operation in the fall semester of 1923 and the new organization was popular immediately.

¹¹ The material in this section is condensed and adapted from an unpublished manuscript by the late Rabbi Benjamin M. Kahn and Rabbi Samuel Z. Fishman and from Rubin (2000); Rubin (2003); Schmidt (1986); and Solberg (1992).

Its success was almost entirely attributable to Frankel, whose magnetic personality, warmth, skill at story-telling and powerful preaching began to draw as many as two hundred students each Sunday morning.¹² Frankel established a Jewish library, formed student committees, brought in speakers, taught classes, and trained religious school leaders. Rather than taking an intellectual approach to Judaism, his focus was very much on Judaism as a religion, and he worked hard to help Jewish students feel part of a religious community through Hillel.

Inspired by this initial success, Frankel, Kuhn and Baldwin sought additional funding to carry the new organization beyond its first year. They approached the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), the umbrella organization for the Reform Movement, but it only provided a small grant that was insufficient to achieve Frankel's vision. The UAHC's response was fortuitous because it kept Hillel from becoming associated with a single Jewish denomination, fostering a model for the future that would serve all Jewish students, regardless of their backgrounds.

Frankel, disappointed by his unsuccessful overtures to UAHC, sought assistance from a member of the new Hillel board, Rabbi Louis Mann from Chicago, who had previously worked with Jewish students at Yale University. Rabbi Mann had been a controversial choice for the board since he was new to the area, but he proved invaluable to Hillel by raising \$10,000 in a single meeting with Chicago businessmen and by introducing Rabbi Frankel to Adolph Kraus, a Chicago attorney who was the president of the Independent Order of B'nai B'rith.

At the time, B'nai B'rith was one of the most prominent organizations in the Jewish communal world. Established in New York in 1843 as a lodge for Jews, the organization was highly innovative, creating a number of new Jewish institutions to meet various needs of the Jewish community. Earlier in 1923 it had founded the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization (BBYO) to meet the needs of Jewish high school students.

B'nai Brith was clearly interested in young Jews and it welcomed new ideas. It also possessed substantial resources. So when Rabbi Frankel addressed the B'nai B'rith executive committee on April 28, 1924, the members were receptive to the idea of supporting Jewish religious centers at American colleges. Rabbi Frankel made an impassioned case to the group, describing the typical Jewish college student:

“As a rule, he is passively Jewish and he is not sure of his Jewish learning. When he enters the university and finds what he interprets as anti-Semitism, he ducks his head in the sand like an ostrich and thinks he has solved the problem. When a student affiliates with Hillel, he in effect declares, ‘I am a Jew,’ and this declaration, when he makes a name for himself on the campus, receives the respect of the campus for all Jewish students.”¹³

The executive committee and Kraus, moved by Frankel's vision, agreed to provide \$25,000. B'nai B'rith assumed responsibility for the Hillel Foundation at the University of Illinois, which would now have a new name, the B'nai B'rith

¹² In the early part of the century, Sunday, rather than Saturday, was the established day for weekly Reform services.

¹³ From Kahn and Fishman (see footnote 11).

Hillel Foundation. It also established a B'nai Brith Hillel Foundation Commission to govern the rapidly growing movement, which began to spread to other Midwest campuses, beginning with the University of Wisconsin.

Frankel continued to be the driving force of the new organization. Other student organizations associated with the Reform and Conservative Movements were formed at various schools and vied for recognition, but Hillel's pluralistic model predominated. The national Menorah Society eventually disappeared. There were also debates about whether Hillel should remain primarily religious and be led by a rabbi, or become more cultural and be led by a lay person. The latter orientation would be more inclusive and would expose all students on campus to Jewish culture.

Frankel argued strongly for the religious model, maintaining that Hillel's future would best be served if it fit into the existing framework of religious ministries on campus. He went on to establish relationships with other campus ministers at the University of Illinois and participated in ecumenical events on campus.

In 1927, during a trip to the Holy Land, Frankel contracted endocarditis, an inflammation of the heart, and died shortly after returning home. His untimely death left a substantial leadership void. Rabbi Louis Mann stepped into the position of acting director of what had now become the B'nai Brith Hillel Foundations, splitting his time between his Chicago pulpit and the growing foundation. Abram I. (Abe) Sachar, a history professor who was a close personal friend of Rabbi Frankel, became the director of the Hillel at

the University of Illinois. In 1933 he succeeded Mann and became the first full-time national Hillel director.

Under Sachar's leadership, new Hillel foundations were soon established all over the country. Although this expansion put considerable pressure on B'nai Brith, Sachar convinced B'nai Brith to continually increase its funding, until Hillel became the largest recipient of allocations from the B'nai Brith program budget. Recognizing the need for local community support and for other funding sources, Sachar also successfully solicited allocations from Jewish federations, thereby creating new partnerships with local Jewish communities.

By 1940 there were twenty Hillel foundations with full-time directors, and more than forty additional campuses with a part-time Hillel presence. Over the years Hillel had evolved to serve a number of functions for Jewish students:

“Hillel served as ‘the synagogue on campus,’ a place where Jewish students could celebrate *Shabbat* and other Jewish holidays, gain access to kosher food and pastoral counseling, participate in informal Jewish learning opportunities before Jewish studies programs proliferated on campus, and socialize with other Jews. In an era when young people typically married in their early twenties, Hillel played a significant role in Jewish dating and courtship. On residential campuses, especially, Hillel offered a ‘home away from home’ and a refuge to Jewish students in a largely gentile environment.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Rubin (2000, p. 309).

In 1947 Sachar stepped down as the national Hillel director, and a year later was recruited as the founding president of Brandeis University. However, he remained a strong presence, continuing as chairman of the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation Commission from 1948 until 1955. Drawing on his unique academic perspective and extensive knowledge of the Jewish community, he skillfully helped Hillel foundations deal with the myriad complexities of university and community politics while continuing to nurture the still vital support of B'nai B'rith.

Sachar's two leadership roles at Hillel, spanning almost a quarter century of service, were instrumental in fostering Hillel's growth and success. Subsequent leaders put their own stamp on Hillel. By the 1960s, however, Hillel's reputation both on campus and in the larger Jewish community had started to erode. Society was changing and the needs and interests of young Jews were changing as well. Hillel struggled to keep pace with a radically changed campus environment.

Hillel Rabbis Get No Respect

In the 1960s, a rabbinical student in his final year at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York ran into one of his mentors, a senior faculty member, in the seminary quadrangle. The mentor inquired about the student's plans after graduation. When the student responded that he would be working for Hillel after becoming a rabbi, the mentor bluntly responded: "Why don't you get a real job?"

For many years after its founding, Hillel was a bright star in the Jewish organizational world, but over time its luster dimmed. By the 1960s the

prevailing perception of Hillel was that it had become largely irrelevant. While each local Hillel had a rabbi and a core group of students who participated in Hillel activities, most Jews on campus were just not interested. The core group was comprised largely of "frummies," those students who had been actively involved with Jewish life in high school and were continuing their involvement in college. "Cool" Jews stayed away. The times were also a factor. As Rabbi Edward Feld, Hillel director at the University of Illinois during this period, observed, "In an age when students protest against the establishment, Hillel is the symbol of the establishment."¹⁵ In 1969, student activists even staged a protest at a national Jewish conference of federation professionals, claiming, not without some justification, that Hillel's leadership and the Jewish establishment were failing to address many important societal problems.

Students' lack of interest in Hillel was mirrored in the larger Jewish community. Jewish institutions were not interested in Hillel or in supporting Jewish life on college campuses. With the exception of B'nai B'rith and some federations, the rest of the Jewish community ignored Jewish college students. It was not uncommon for Hillel staff to receive little recognition or respect. Many in the Jewish community viewed Hillel rabbis as "*shleppers*,"¹⁶ and from a career perspective, Hillel was seen as a place for rabbis to go if they couldn't make it in a "real job" in a synagogue.

Although this may have been the case for some of the rabbis, for others the situation was quite different. A number of the Hillel rabbis had chosen Hillel work as their mission and calling. They were drawn to the intellectual stimulation

¹⁵ Rubin (2003, p. 10).

¹⁶ Yiddish expression describing someone who has a menial job.

of the campus environment and to the opportunity to inspire young Jews at a time when their Jewish identities were being formed. These rabbis saw the work as a chance to shape the future of American Judaism by creating new Jewish leaders each year who would be inspired to serve the Jewish community after graduation. They viewed their job as a way to engage in social activism by influencing a generation and fostering social change.

Rabbis who self-selected into Hillel had a job description unlike any other in the rabbinate. This elite, closely-bonded group of approximately one hundred intellectually and spiritually-oriented rabbis came from all three major branches of Judaism — Reform, Conservative and Orthodox. The pluralistic model that Rabbi Frankel had created in the 1920s had endured. Historian Jonathan Sarna summarizes Hillel’s rabbinic culture during the 1960s and 1970s:

“Hillel once had a vision of a different kind of Judaism — a Judaism without denominational boundaries, a Judaism that was socially active, a Judaism that was anti-establishment. This vision was attractive to certain kinds of rabbis and it was a very important part of the Hillel ethos.”¹⁷

Most Hillel rabbis loved their work. Rabbi Jeffrey Summit at Tufts University relates: “I always felt that I had the best job in the world.” Rabbi James Diamond, who served at Washington University and Princeton University, described his job as “absolutely unbelievable work. There is nothing like it. It’s a privilege.”

The very qualities that enabled them to thrive in an academic environment also made them, as one candidly acknowledged:

“not so easy to deal with... they were successful specifically because they were cantankerous and oppositional and creative and in your face.”

Many rabbis were frustrated because, from their perspective, they received confirmation from students and colleagues on campus each day that their work was important and meaningful; yet there were very few outside of their own group who appreciated what they were accomplishing. Rabbi Bill Rudolph, who worked in the national office, describes the Hillel culture:

“It was a culture of mostly rabbi-dominated thinking and for a variety of reasons had come to accept that it would not reach anywhere near the majority of students. It was also a culture of deprivation. Hillel was the least-funded organization in Jewish life, and in a way expected to do the most... and Hillel had a low profile, and a low esteem level. If you tried to recruit rabbis to work in Hillel, they had to have always wanted to be a Hillel director, or they had to be really desperate to be interested.”

In 1949, shortly after Abe Sachar, the new president of Brandeis University, had become chair of the Hillel Commission, the National Association of Hillel Directors¹⁸ was created to address the needs of Hillel rabbis and lay staff. Although the organization advocated effectively for Hillel professionals through its early years, by the 1980s it had become especially visible and activist.

¹⁷ Sarna (email communication, September 22, 2005).

¹⁸ Later, as non-director program specialists joined the Hillel staff, the organization became known as the Association of Hillel and Jewish Campus Professionals (AHJCP).

Funding Complexities

Although B'nai B'rith had once been a prominent and respected organization in the Jewish communal world, describing itself as “the world’s largest Jewish organization,” in the early 1980s it began to experience serious financial difficulties.

Membership in B'nai B'rith lodges had become passé. Much of the innovative work that B'nai B'rith had initiated in the past was now being carried out by other Jewish organizations. B'nai B'rith was losing members. It had not been able to adequately redefine its mission in response to a changing Jewish world and it had not built a fundraising base. Because membership was dwindling, it relied more and more on revenues from such mundane activities as medical insurance policies and travel programs, which never could provide funding for growth.

Hillel was a large item in B'nai B'rith's budget, with most of the money designated for Hillel professionals' salaries and benefits. As B'nai B'rith's revenues fell, Hillel's allocation necessarily suffered. B'nai B'rith was in no position to support pay increases, and as a consequence, disputes over salary between Hillel's national office and B'nai B'rith became increasingly contentious. The national office's inability to resolve these disputes led to a worsening of its relationships with Hillel professionals in the field.

Hillel was still heavily dependent upon B'nai B'rith, even though B'nai B'rith was no longer providing most of the total national Hillel budget. Back in the 1930s and 1940s, Abe Sachar had begun to solicit funding from local Jewish federations. When Rabbi Oscar Groner became International Director of Hillel in 1979, one of his

goals was to increase the money coming from federations. He subsequently became highly successful at marketing local Hillels to local federations, since federations were community-based entities that provided funding to just a few national organizations.

These efforts generated about \$10 million annually for local Hillels. B'nai B'rith provided another \$3 million for the national office and the field. There was, as yet, no department of development at Hillel. Rabbi Richard Israel, the regional director for Hillel in Boston, had begun to give workshops on local fundraising to Hillel rabbis, but it was still a novel concept that was being pursued at only a few campuses. Rabbis had joined the rabbinate to teach and study Torah, not to be fundraisers. While a few recognized the need, most were unwilling to go out and actually ask for donations.

In spite of the fact that federations were now providing most of the financial support for local Hillels, the money was allocated in a fragmented fashion, with specific federations designating money for specific Hillels. There was no national vision for Hillel. Local federations were only interested in what was taking place in their own communities. As a result, Hillels at campuses in small college towns struggled, since they were not in the “right neighborhood,” and did not reap the benefit of being in the catchment area of a large, well-funded metropolitan area federation.

Hillel units at prestigious schools with national reputations that attracted the brightest Jewish students from all over the country, like Cornell, Princeton, and Yale, received little or no federation

support. These Hillels, along with a number of others located at schools in small college towns, were largely dependent upon funding from the national office. Yet the system through which the national office made allocations to local Hillels was, in the words of one rabbi, “bizarre [and] antiquated,” based more on history and politics than on current needs or circumstances.

The field had devolved into the “haves,” the Hillels that were the beneficiaries of local federation support, and the “have-nots,” the Hillels that were substantially dependent upon B’nai B’rith. About two thirds of the Hillel rabbis fell into the latter group, and it was this group that suffered the most from B’nai B’rith’s unwillingness to go along with the national office’s salary recommendations. Even though some of these rabbis held positions as campus ministers and received money from their universities, most were entirely dependent on the Hillel national office. Rabbi Sam Fishman described B’nai B’rith’s stranglehold succinctly: “for their 10 percent stake, they wanted 100 percent of control.”

Acquiring federation money was a way for Hillel rabbis to supplement their salaries and to avoid the complications arising from B’nai B’rith funding. Yet there was a price to be paid. While having federation support was better than not having it, rabbis were seldom comfortable with the way federations viewed them, sensing that their executives did not appreciate Hillel’s intellectual and religious culture.

Federation executives, from their side, saw that many of the rabbis were unskilled at nonprofit management and needed to be more accountable for the allocations their Hillel foundations

received. They also saw that the quality of local Hillels was uneven — some federations funded thriving Hillel foundations with dynamic rabbis while others funded Hillels with unimpressive rabbis who accomplished little.

Federation efforts to bring about more accountability were sometimes heavy-handed and backfired. When, for example, the Minneapolis Jewish Federation gave generous funding to the Hillel at the University of Minnesota, it installed a museum-type electric eye to count the number of students who entered. This sent a chill throughout the Hillel system because it signaled to rabbis that quality was less important than numbers. Cynically, they joked about having students run in and out of the building to bolster the attendance figures.

Another aspect of the relationship with the federations was that most federation leaders did not have a positive view of B’nai B’rith, seeing it as an organization past its prime. Hillel had gotten its start in the 1920s only because of B’nai B’rith’s foresight and generosity, but sixty years later it still was called the B’nai B’rith Hillel Foundation, and suffered from guilt by association. In some communities, the association with B’nai B’rith was a barrier to the acquisition of federation money. Federation executives would often justify their lack of support for Hillel with variations of the phrase “it’s B’nai B’rith’s responsibility, not ours.”

These convoluted relationships among B’nai B’rith, the federations, and Hillel were further complicated by B’nai B’rith’s attitude toward the federations. While the rabbis had their own concerns about federation money, B’nai B’rith was also wary of the federations — for an entirely different reason. They were worried that the federations would

eventually make it possible for Hillel to “secede” and cut its ties to B’nai B’rith altogether. B’nai B’rith may have been restricting Hillel’s budget, but it wasn’t because the organization didn’t want to support Hillel — it simply didn’t have the means. B’nai B’rith retained an interest in supporting Jewish college students and it wanted to hold on to Hillel.

In the early 1980s, when B’nai B’rith’s financial difficulties became acute, the organization negotiated an arrangement with the federations that guaranteed a certain level of funding to Hillel in return for an understanding that Hillel would remain under B’nai B’rith’s control. However, this decision ended up handcuffing Hillel’s growth.

Rabbi Oscar Groner was not circumspect in expressing his belief that Hillel eventually would need to become independent of B’nai B’rith. Rabbi Sam Fishman quipped that as Rabbi Groner successfully acquired new federation funding, “every victory was a defeat as far as B’nai B’rith was concerned.” Rabbi Groner and other Hillel rabbis had even found it necessary to arrange backroom deals with federations so that B’nai B’rith would not feel that their ownership of Hillel was being usurped. In some cities, such as Cleveland and Philadelphia, federations instructed their Hillels to opt out of the national system and rely entirely on their support.

Troubled Relations

As one rabbi described the situation, Hillel was caught “between a sick B’nai B’rith and an ascendant secular bean-counting federation.” The combination of B’nai B’rith budget restrictions, growing federation influence and conflicts

regarding the degree of control that B’nai B’rith exercised over Hillel generated ongoing tension throughout the system, especially at the Hillel national office. Hillel was housed on the fourth floor of the B’nai B’rith building on Rhode Island Avenue in Washington, D.C. and the B’nai B’rith executive offices were on the seventh. There was a constant feeling on the part of Hillel that B’nai B’rith was looking over its shoulder, engaging to an excessive degree in micromanagement. One rabbi said he wondered during those days whether the Jewish communal world would see its first homicide if a certain member of the Hillel national office and a certain B’nai B’rith executive were to enter the same elevator.

By 1983, the situation for the rabbis and lay Hillel staff had become intolerable. Devoted rabbis who had considered Hillel their life work were finding it necessary to leave because their pay was inadequate and no relief was on the horizon. Hillel rabbis at the time were earning about \$24,000 annually, approximately \$8,000 to \$10,000 less than the average salary for pulpit rabbis.

In February 1983, B’nai B’rith’s financial management committee rejected a proposal for a new salary scale for Hillel professionals that had been evolving through a series of informal meetings over a three-year period. In response, the rabbis formally unionized, voting by a large majority to affiliate with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). On May 30th, B’nai B’rith’s Board of Governors rejected their request for recognition.

On May 31st, 18 rabbis picketed the B’nai B’rith building for five hours. They carried signs

reading, “B’nai B’rith Stop Exploiting Us,” and “Recognition is a Basic Right.” They sang together as one of them played guitar. The Washington Post ran a story about the protest, quoting Gerald Kraft, then lay president of B’nai B’rith:

“We regret the decision made by this group to attempt to pressure B’nai B’rith today through public display rather than the continuation of what had been a fruitful dialogue.”¹⁹

The relationship was so strained that B’nai B’rith did not allow the rabbis walking the picket line that day into the building to use the bathrooms.

Searching for a Leader

The rabbis’ efforts to unionize waned. Eventually, after several additional years of worsening relations, Rabbi Oscar Groner was pressured by B’nai B’rith to retire. Several long-time Hillel directors were interested in becoming the new International Director, but B’nai B’rith looked outside to fill the position. Daniel Thursz, the Executive Vice-President for B’nai B’rith, who was primarily responsible for the financial controls and salary constrictions, stated publicly that he would not consider anyone currently in the system. He was trying hard to arrest B’nai B’rith’s financial decline and, from his perspective, an insider would be too sympathetic to the rabbis’ salary requests.

Thursz and B’nai B’rith selected Larry Moses. Even though he was relatively young — in his 30s — and was not a rabbi, Moses brought a promising mix of skills and experience. He was familiar with the Hillel culture and knew most of the rabbis in the system because he had served successfully as

the director of the Hillel at San Francisco State University for five years. Yet, as one of the very few non-rabbinic Hillel directors, he was not entirely of the culture. In addition, his administrative skills were highly regarded. Moses had subsequently served as the head of the Bureau of Jewish Education in San Francisco, an agency with a budget of \$3 million. He also had a positive history with Thursz, having been a graduate student at the school of social work where Thursz had served as professor and dean. Although the two men had not maintained contact since Moses graduated, feelings of mutual respect remained.

Taking the job was a significant risk for Moses. He was very happy with his Bureau of Jewish Education job, but decided to take the Hillel position because he saw it as a new challenge and an opportunity to, in his words, “bridge the rift” between the rabbis and B’nai B’rith. He felt that he had credibility with both sides and could work effectively with Thursz.

The rabbis, however, experienced his choice differently. They viewed him as someone who had been hired primarily because he would do what Thursz wanted. Many resented the fact that venerated rabbis had been bypassed for someone who was not a rabbi, who had considerably less experience, and whose loyalty to Hillel was suspect because he had left for another job.

The decision by Moses to take the position turned out to be, he recalls, a “miscalculation.” Despite some promising moments during his tenure, he overestimated each side’s degree of goodwill, willingness to compromise, and capacity to move beyond turf issues. Instead, he came to realize

¹⁹ Murphy (1983).

that the prevalent ethos was one of “radical oppositionalism.” When he tried to be a mediator, the rabbis thought he was working for the other side. When he presented the legitimate concerns of the rabbis, B’nai B’rith became suspicious and considered him disloyal.

Moses spent several years in this difficult role. His relationship with Thursz deteriorated and became unworkable. Moses had both sympathy for and loyalty to the Hillel rabbis, his former colleagues, and Thursz saw that Moses was not going to do what he wanted.

In the summer of 1987, Moses was offered a position at the Wexner Foundation in Columbus, Ohio, and accepted it, recognizing that the situation at Hillel would continue to worsen. Seymour Reich, who had recently become the new lay president of B’nai B’rith, tried to talk Moses into staying. Moses inferred from the conversation that Thursz might be leaving, but the new position was too attractive to refuse.

After Moses left, there was no appointment of a new international director. Rabbi Bill Rudolph and Rabbi Sam Fishman shared the responsibilities in an interim capacity.

The rabbis had already been having conversations for several years about Hillel’s uncertain future. Now the worries grew stronger. Hillel could not grow as long as it remained under B’nai B’rith, but it could not survive as an independent entity. The federations could potentially save Hillel, but not under the current arrangement in which they supported certain Hillel foundations and not others while largely ignoring the national office.

B’nai B’rith, however, remained optimistic about Hillel under the new lay leadership of Seymour Reich. Thursz took a new position as president of the National Council on Aging less than a year after Moses left, and B’nai B’rith hired a new executive vice-president, Tom Neumann. The search for a new international director for Hillel began.

The B’nai B’rith search committee charged with the task of finding a new international director for Hillel took its mandate seriously and cast a wide net for candidates. It did not, however, have a diverse membership. Although there were a few federation representatives on the committee, no Hillel rabbis, Hillel staff, women, or students were involved in the search. The Hillel rabbis were understandably unhappy at being kept out and tried unsuccessfully to have someone from Hillel included in the process. They had no idea what was going on.

A Reluctant Candidate

Richard Joel was born September 9, 1950 and grew up an only child in Yonkers, New York. His father, Avery, was born in Vilna, Lithuania, lived for a time in South Africa, and then moved to America. Joel’s mother, Annette, was an American twenty years younger than Joel’s father who had served as his secretary. When Joel was five, the family moved back to South Africa for a year and a half, but his parents ultimately decided that they did not want to raise a child in that environment.

Although Joel attended public school through 8th grade, his upbringing was filled with Jewish tradition — Jewish values and Torah were a central part of his early life, and the family

participated in a modern Orthodox synagogue in the Yonkers neighborhood where he grew up. Joel “always felt [that he was] a strong, proud part of the Jewish people through family.” Music was an important part of his life and in his teen years he became a youth leader and *kumsitz*²⁰ leader, playing the accordion and telling stories.

Joel’s father died when he was 13. Joel was robbed of his adolescence, but acquired a deep awareness of “the finite nature of life.” His mother insisted that he could either “curse the darkness or light a candle,” and what he learned was to savor every moment, because we’re “not going to have today again.”

Although he attended Yeshiva University High School, which was Orthodox, he decided not to continue at Yeshiva University for college, choosing instead to enroll in the Metropolitan Leadership Program at New York University’s Bronx campus.

Still, Joel went to Yeshiva University regularly to sit in on classes and attend lectures. There he met his future wife, Esther, at a *Shabbaton*.²¹ She encouraged him to serve as an advisor at a Yeshiva University leadership seminar, and he decided to go primarily because she was going to be there.

Joel ended up being hired and headed off to spend time at Camp Morasha, an Orthodox residential summer camp. His many talents quickly became visible and he was identified as someone who could serve in a leadership role. By the end of the summer, he was asked to be the part-time director of a new leadership youth program sponsored by Yeshiva University for day school students. When he attended the first meeting that fall, Esther

turned out to be the girls’ head advisor. He and Esther worked together closely in their respective roles and became best friends. Upon graduating from NYU, Joel enrolled in law school. He and Esther became engaged during his first year and married during his second year.

By this point, Joel had become head advisor of many youth programs at Yeshiva University. He did not enjoy law school because it had little to do with “fixing the world,” even though he had received a full-tuition public service scholarship. He interned in the Bronx district attorney’s office and did find the experience valuable. When he graduated he took a position as an assistant district attorney.

Richard and Esther Joel moved to an Orthodox community, and he became part-time youth director at a nearby synagogue. He and Esther were among the founders of the local *chevra kadisha*²² society, periodically receiving phone calls when someone in the community died. He also had encounters with the dead in a different capacity through his professional work. On those occasions when he was assigned to homicide duty, his responsibilities took him from one drug murder in the Bronx to another. The contrast between these gruesome encounters and the holiness of his *chevra kadisha* work, in combination with the many fulfilling experiences he had working with the Jewish community, inspired him to resolve to spend his life “doing things with and for [the Jewish] people.”

When Rabbi Norman Lamm became president of Yeshiva University, he asked Joel to take a leave from his district attorney job and join his administration, specifically to build an alumni

²⁰ A Jewish singalong; in Yiddish, literally “come sit.”

²¹ Sabbath retreat.

²² A volunteer organization that prepares the dead for burial according to Jewish ritual.

office. Joel accepted. Then, two years later, when the dean of Yeshiva University's Cardozo School of Law died, Rabbi Lamm asked him to work with the acting dean to build an infrastructure for the school. He agreed to try it out for a three-month period. The law school faculty, many of whom were not necessarily aligned with the university's larger mission, were "terribly suspicious" of him at first because they thought he was the university's new informant.

Three months later, both the university and the faculty petitioned him to stay. He was promoted to Associate Dean, and eventually was named a professor. After spending eight years helping to build the school and teaching, Joel became restless and started looking around:

"I had a good job... There was just this sense of... is there something that I'm supposed to be doing that I'm not doing?"

Adding to these inner feelings were his outer circumstances — he and his wife Esther had five young children, no independent resources, and the "bills were mounting."

He considered working in the Jewish community but was advised by friends that no suitable match existed. Despite his wife's reservations, he applied for a position at a Wall Street law firm. Then, early in 1988 he received a phone call "out of the blue" from Joel Paul, a former regional Hillel director in Philadelphia who was now running an executive search firm. Joel Paul was the same person who had hired Richard Joel seventeen years earlier to be a youth advisor. Richard Joel recreates their initial conversation:

Joel Paul: "Richard, there's this job out there. It's probably impossible to do. You're clearly a long shot. They've met lots of people. They're not satisfied."

Richard Joel: "What job?"

Joel Paul: "Well, the Director of Hillel."

Richard Joel: "Hillel? I never set foot in Hillel when I was in college."

Joel Paul: "That's not necessarily a negative."

Richard Joel: "I'm not a rabbi."

Joel Paul: "That's not necessarily a negative."

Richard Joel: "Where is it based?"

Joel Paul: "Washington."

Richard Joel: "Forget it...I like Washington, but I'm not going to relocate the family. We're very happy in our community. Forget it."

Richard Joel came home and told Esther about the conversation. She encouraged him to apply, but he protested — the job sounded impossible and their life in New York was good. He recalls his wife's advice: "very few people have a chance at one good life. We'll have a chance at two... go for an interview."

Joel met initially with B'nai B'rith president Seymour Reich, and then flew to Washington for an interview. He walked into the room and found fifteen or sixteen men, most of them elderly, ready to ask questions. His academic position apparently impressed them — they addressed him as Dean

Joel — and he sensed they were pleased that he was not a rabbi. The skullcap he wore as a modern Orthodox Jew did set him apart from other the candidates, because it signaled a stricter level of religious observance and implied that he possessed traditional, rather than progressive beliefs about the role of women in Judaism. Finally, one of the interviewers got around to addressing his religious beliefs indirectly. Joel was asked how he would feel about appointing a Reform rabbi as the director of a Hillel foundation. He paused for dramatic effect, and then said: “It really would depend on her attitude.” The committee was silent for a moment and then broke into laughter. There were no more questions about religion. He had given a great interview, in part because he was not invested in getting the job.

Joel received a call the next day informing him that he now was one of two finalists. The other finalist was a Hillel insider. Joel was asked to return in several weeks for a final interview. On the day of the second interview, the committee offered him the position. Joel had to be talked into accepting it.

What’s His Last Name?

Barry Shrage, a personal friend of Joel and federation executive, speculates about why Joel accepted the position:

“God knows why he decided to do this thing. I guess because he was really committed to the Jewish people and the guy’s got an enormous talent. He can do anything... Richard Joel is an exceptional leader... and that was what was required for the job at the time.”

Seymour Reich recalls that the committee’s decision was an easy one, despite Joel’s unconventional background. They were looking for someone who was different and who would bring a new perspective to the position. Joel appeared to have an intuitive grasp of Hillel’s problems and had the kind of vision the committee was seeking. He also seemed to have the skills to reunify the disparate Hillel foundations across the country, and possessed a deep understanding of the needs and concerns faced by Jewish students on college campuses. Reich describes the committee’s thinking:

“He was out of the box. He was prepared to bring a new perspective to Hillel. There was some concern about Hillel, that Hillel was really languishing. It was a whole bunch of separate institutions without any centrifugal force, notwithstanding Hillel coordination from Washington. But it lacked charisma, it lacked drive, and it lacked... a vision in terms of where Hillel could go and the importance of Hillel on the college campus.”

In June 1988, Rabbi James Diamond, the president of the Hillel professional association, received a message from his B’nai B’rith contact. Like everyone else at Hillel, he had been kept in the dark about Joel’s candidacy and selection. Rabbi Diamond recalls some of the conversation when he responded to the message:

B'nai B'rith: "Rabbi Diamond, you have a leader. You are going to love him."

Diamond: "Tell me about him."

B'nai B'rith: "Well, he's not a rabbi. But he is very good. And he's Orthodox."

Diamond: "What's his name?"

B'nai B'rith: "His name is Richard Joel."

Diamond: "What's his last name?"

B'nai B'rith: "That's his name, Richard Joel."

Diamond: "There must be a last name."

B'nai B'rith: "No, that's his name. You are really going to like him. We think he's great."

Director of the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation, which had been leaderless for over a year. He was 37 years old.

The B'nai B'rith representative also told Diamond about Joel's background as a law school dean and district attorney. Diamond was polite throughout the conversation and concealed his disbelief as he contemplated what the committee, from the rabbis' vantage point, appeared to have done. They had hired as the new International Director an Orthodox Jew no one seemed to have heard of who would in all likelihood be unable to relate to the less observant, prevailing orientations of Hillel's Reform and Conservative Jews. Furthermore, his background was in the legal profession, he wasn't a rabbi and he had little personal experience with Hillel. Rabbi Diamond promptly called his colleagues to tell them the news. Their common reaction was something like: "Jim, you've got to be joking."

Joel resigned from Cardozo Law School effective June 30, 1988 to become the new International

Chapter 2: New Leader, New Vision — 1988 to 1992

Meet Me in St. Louis

The executive committee of the professional association of Hillel rabbis, known as the “cabinet,” decided to schedule a meeting in the summer of 1988. None of them had met Joel. Rabbi James Diamond called Joel and invited him to come to Washington University in St. Louis, where the meeting was to be held, and Joel readily agreed.

The meeting began on a Tuesday night with dinner, but Joel wasn’t asked to join the group until after lunch on Wednesday. The rabbis met Tuesday night and all morning Wednesday, discussing various issues, including how they were going to present themselves to the new director. They agreed they would be respectful and professional. While they had concerns about his suitability for the position, they wanted to give him a fair chance.

Joel pulled up in a cab in the early afternoon, and he and Rabbi Diamond made small talk for fifteen minutes before they both joined the larger group. Once the meeting began, Joel told the group that he would first like to spend some time getting to know them, and then he would talk about himself. He was curious about how long they had been

doing Hillel work, why they were doing it, and what it meant to them. Each rabbi in the meeting talked for five or ten minutes. The level of self-disclosure was, as Diamond recalls, “extraordinary.” The rabbis shared their visions and spoke in a very personal way about their experiences and aspirations. It took two hours to go around the table. When they finished, Joel said: “I’ve come to the right place.”

Joel, in the same personal fashion as the rabbis, proceeded to speak with passion about who he was and why he had accepted the position, sharing his vision for Hillel. Diamond remembers the feeling in the room when he was finished:

“That’s when the Richard Joel period began... we just knew that we had the right guy... and good things were going to happen... he and I bonded from day one, and many of us did.”

Rabbi Jeffrey Summit also recalls the afternoon:

“Simply put, Richard blew us away... he was articulate, he was passionate... he had experience doing youth work and

college work... he was Jewishly knowledgeable... it was clear that he thought outside the box... he was very smart... but he was humble and serious about this work, and he valued it as much as we did.”

Joel, from a more pragmatic perspective, also recalls the meeting: “It bought me a year... it bought me the credibility.” Despite all the earlier misgivings, it had taken only a single meeting for Joel to turn the cabinet around. They enthusiastically embraced him as their new leader.

As Joel perceived the situation, winning over this influential group was essential if he was to be effective in his new leadership role as the national executive. For the most part, the Hillel rabbis, who had not yet met Joel, resented the fact that B’nai B’rith had hired an outsider. They would not be likely to accept him readily. He would have to work hard to win their trust and confidence.

Allies and Advice

Joel knew when he accepted the position that both Hillel and B’nai B’rith had problems, but he also knew that he would not uncover the full extent of the problems until he started. He was already aware that Hillel did not have a good reputation, either in the Jewish communal world or on campus. It was also apparent that morale among Hillel’s staff was poor. In addition, Hillel’s governance structure was weak — most local Hillels operated autonomously with little interest in being part of a national movement — and the national office of Hillel was both understaffed and underutilized.

As for funding, nothing had changed: Hillel was still dependent upon B’nai B’rith. Although B’nai B’rith’s decline continued, it supported Hillel while maintaining close oversight of those portions of the Hillel budget that it still controlled. When Joel was hired, it appeared that B’nai B’rith would continue its support. According to Joel, the leaders of B’nai B’rith, Seymour Reich and Tom Neumann, did not consider Hillel to be a priority for the organization, but they were also not obstructionist in their orientation as Thursz had been. They genuinely wanted Joel and Hillel to be successful. A new climate was emerging as B’nai B’rith was coming to realize that it needed a different approach toward Hillel.

Joel was told that Hillel would receive an annual four percent increase, and that he would not have to do fundraising. Of Hillel’s annual budget of \$14 million, B’nai B’rith was providing \$3 million — \$2 million to the national office and \$1 million to campus-based Hillel foundations and local student programs. For the time being, at least, the situation appeared to be stable, and financial support for Hillel would not be an immediate concern for Joel.

In preparation for taking the position, Joel had read everything about Hillel that he could find. From the very beginning, he turned to Rabbi Bill Rudolph, the ranking person in Hillel’s national office, to help him get oriented and to provide the “institutional history” he lacked. Joel describes the relationship:

“[Bill Rudolph] was unpretentious, disarmingly honest, [had] incredible commitment, and integrity... from the

beginning [he] talked straight to me... when he heard about what could be, he wanted it. So he really became my right hand. He has such integrity that his speaking behind my back to colleagues saying, ‘you’ve got to give this guy a chance’ bought me tremendous credibility. I could trust him with my life.”

Joel knew that he needed to win over the rabbis and build their morale, recognizing that they had been “beaten up by the Jewish community.” He relied heavily upon Rabbi Rudolph for feedback, assistance, and guidance.

However, his vision for Hillel was considerably broader than merely improving the situation for professional staff, and he saw beyond the conflicts that had dominated Hillel’s relationship with B’nai B’rith. Joel knew that the primary focus of his efforts had to be on the students, not the staff. At his first meeting with the Hillel Commission he recalls commenting:

“Hillel is not about a rabbi. The rabbi is not the program. It’s about an institution. Our client is not the staff. The client is the Jewish people.”

In a small but symbolic act, one of the first things Joel did during his first few months was to change the name of the national office to the National Center. An office, in Joel’s words, is a place where “accountants and bureaucrats reside,” while a center is where “shared values reside.” He went on to say: “Movements live in centers, businesses live in offices.” He wanted the National Center to be a place that continued to provide service to the

field, but he also wanted it to be a place that would provide leadership for a national and later an international movement. Even though the distinction was subtle, using the name “national office” was not as likely to inspire the kind of image of Hillel that Joel was trying to create. Several years later, the National Center would become the International Center.

That year, at the General Assembly²³ held in New Orleans, having been on the job only a few months, Joel gave a presentation for Hillel at the Large City Budgeting Conference, where the dollar figure that federations would be providing to Hillel would be established. After he spoke, the audience had some difficult questions. He handled them adroitly. Rabbi Rudolph, who was present at the talk, had been hearing these sorts of questions for years, and recalled that he “still couldn’t answer them very well.” But this time, things were different. Rudolph remembers:

“Richard had them eating out of the palm of his hand. It was just an amazing performance. He was so quick on his feet... here was someone with a vision, and with wit, and a purpose, and *yiddishkeit*,²⁴ and an implementation plan.”

Yet despite the success of this talk, Joel and Hillel and the college constituency they represented were otherwise ignored at the General Assembly. B’nai B’rith sponsored a reception to welcome Joel, but almost no one came. Joel recalls:

“I spent most of that GA standing next to a designated plant in the corridor. And I’d see three thousand Jews walk past,

²³ An annual meeting sponsored by the Council of Jewish Federations and attended by lay and professional leaders of Jewish federations and communal agencies.

²⁴ A Yiddish term referring to the quality of being steeped in Judaism.

look at my face, look at the name tag... and walk on.”

Joel saw firsthand that Hillel and college students were not taken seriously by the Jewish world.

During these early months on the job Joel traveled extensively. Hillel had no travel budget, so he raided a Hillel trust fund originally designated for another purpose in order to finance his trips. He also commuted each week from New York to Washington, as his family had not yet relocated. He met with representatives of many Jewish organizations and received advice, both solicited and unsolicited, from rabbis in the field.

Joel also met with students at local Hillel foundations and shared his passion for Judaism with them. It was obvious to anyone who saw him in these settings that he had an innate gift that had been cultivated and refined during his days as a youth leader. Despite his own Orthodox background and practice, he related to all types of students, and conveyed his genuine love for Jewish tradition. Barry Shrage observes:

“You have to see him operate with the students. The students love him. Richard has a Jewish vision. He believes in the beauty and mission of Judaism and Jewish community with passion, and more than anything else, Hillel and most Jewish organizations require passionate leadership to succeed.”

At B’nai B’rith, Hillel coexisted with the B’nai B’rith Youth Organization, whose mission was to provide Jewish experiences for Jewish high school students. In Sid Clearfield, Joel’s counterpart at the

BBYO, he found a kindred spirit with whom he could commiserate. They spoke often about the parallel challenges their respective jobs presented. He describes Clearfield as a “wonderful friend [and] a safe harbor...he believed in me.”

Joel was new to the culture at Hillel and he was able to look at it with a fresh vision. He saw that incremental improvements would not suffice — major changes were needed. He termed the process for bringing these changes about “evolutionary revolution.” Rabbi Rudolph recalls:

“I think being an outsider was really critical. He was able to question things that we did. We were willing to think that fine-tuning would be all we needed. And he was willing to say ‘it ain’t working this way. You’ve got to change it.’”

Developing Lay Leadership

Around this time, the term of the current chair of the Hillel Commission was coming to an end. Joel’s experience at the General Assembly in New Orleans and his frustrating interactions with Jewish community leaders during his first few months led him to approach Seymour Reich to discuss the selection of a new chairman, someone who would help build credibility with federations.

Sid Clearfield and Rabbi Bill Rudolph had both recommended David Bittker, a friend of Seymour Reich. Bittker, a highly successful businessman who was President of the National Lumber Company in Detroit, was “respected by everybody,” as Reich recalls — both within B’nai B’rith, where he was a member of the national Board of Governors and the

national fundraising chair, and with federations, where he was an active lay leader and generous contributor. Although he had not been directly involved with the national Hillel movement previously, he did have some familiarity with Hillel leadership in Michigan.

Bittker recalls receiving a call from Joel “out of the blue” to ask him to chair the Hillel Commission. Until then, the two men had never met or even talked. After a lengthy conversation during which Joel discussed his vision, Bittker agreed to serve. The two hit it off immediately as they began to work together. Joel appreciated Bittker’s credibility with B’nai B’rith and respected his sophisticated business knowledge and experience. Bittker found Joel to be intelligent and charismatic and liked his vision for the organization.

Joel had little previous experience with lay boards and relied heavily on Bittker’s counsel. The two men began the process of remaking the Commission, which at the time was populated by older men from B’nai B’rith lodges who were not in tune with the needs and mindset of college students fifty or more years younger. The new members that Joel and Bittker appointed were young, inspired, and intelligent. Several were Wexner Heritage Fellows.²⁵ Their involvement would prove to be very helpful. Joel and Bittker also made a concerted effort to add women. Over the course of several years, Joel convinced B’nai B’rith to amend its constitution so that federation leaders, representatives of Jewish denominational movements, and students could also join the Hillel Commission.

Joel had now enlisted two critical partners — a professional and a lay leader — who could help him enact his vision. Looking back, Joel observes: “if it couldn’t have been without Bill Rudolph, it couldn’t have been without David Bittker.”

Sharing the Vision

After six months on the job, Joel spoke to the professional staff of Hillel at the Annual Conference of Professionals in December 1988 — his first “State of Hillel” talk to the entire group. He knew that his speech needed to be nothing less than outstanding to win their confidence and he spent many hours preparing.

But the content of the speech was only one element of the presentation. Joel also shared his passion for Judaism with the professional staff as he had done with students. He began in Hebrew with a passage from the Book of Genesis: “May the angel who has saved me from all evil, bless the children, and let them carry my name.”²⁶ Joel went on to make the point that these words of the biblical patriarch Jacob when he blessed his children could be seen as Hillel’s mission statement. He told the group:

“For you dedicate your lives to invest the fullness of God’s blessings in the Children of Israel, as they embark on their lives’ journeys, so that they would carry the name Yisrael.”²⁷

Although he was not a rabbi, he had been studying Torah his entire life, and he spoke the rabbis’ language fluently. Joel’s talk was humble and candid. He acknowledged that he was not an obvious candidate for the job and that several

²⁵ The Wexner Heritage Foundation, started in 1985 by businessman and philanthropist Leslie Wexner and led by Rabbi Herb Friedman, provided intensive Jewish education to promising lay leaders in Jewish communities around the country.

²⁶ Speech entitled *If Not Now, When?* given by Richard Joel in December 1988. Quote from Genesis 48:16.

²⁷ *If Not Now, When?* Joel was referring to a biblical passage in which Jacob was given the new name Yisrael (Israel) when he wrestled with an angel (Genesis 32:29).

rabbis in the room could have been standing in his place. He went on to thank everyone who had helped him over the course of the first six months, and then he presented his vision.

With regard to Jewish students on college campuses, things had not changed all that much since Hillel's first year in 1924, when Rabbi Frankel made his speech to B'nai B'rith in search of financial support for the new foundation. Students were still largely ignorant about their tradition and most were uninterested in Judaism or Hillel. Yet the Jewish community did not seem to be highly concerned. Joel acknowledged this reality:

“It’s not our fault that so many children come to the campus with no sense of Jewish identity... It’s not our fault that the priorities of the Jewish community too often tend to ignore the college years as a legitimate constituency... All this is not our fault; it’s our burden.”²⁸

While acknowledging the current situation, Joel articulated his vision:

“But we must not accept the world as it is. That’s the antithesis of our mission; for we are dream merchants. And to spread a dream, and connect us with our past and future, we must do more than be sincere and be available to those who seek us out... We must not accept the realities of a program that we know can improve... We must not accept the inevitability of low participation... We must engage in exploring new possibilities, in always seeking new avenues, in revitalizing ourselves.”²⁹

Joel also discussed a theme on which he would focus throughout his years at Hillel — changing Hillel’s reputation in the Jewish community:

“It’s vital to tell our story well... We must pay careful attention to the messages we send out, and how we are perceived. If we relate carefully to those issues, perceptions can change.”³⁰

The speech was a resounding success. Joel subsequently came to see these “State of Hillel” speeches as a chance to apply his theories of how one builds an organization. Each year, he would present a new theme offering a vision of what needed to be accomplished in the coming months. This engaged Hillel leadership and gave them a stake in the national organization.

Reaching Out to Stakeholders

The speech Joel gave in December 1988 summarized his first six months of activity. In the year that followed, Joel had two clear goals, providing leadership for the movement, and providing services to the Hillel network. Both required a stronger National Center than currently existed. He would need to staff the National Center with experts who could serve the field.

To help strengthen the National Center, Joel asked Seymour Reich to convene a panel of national leaders from B'nai B'rith and the Council of Jewish Federations (CJF) to formulate a strategic plan. The resulting document, issued in March 1989, was frank about history:

“issues of the role and autonomy of the National Office and its governing body, the B'nai B'rith Hillel Commission,

²⁸ *If Not Now, When?*

²⁹ *If Not Now, When?*

³⁰ *If Not Now, When?*

became sufficiently preoccupying that the national operation found itself in a defensive posture that precluded growth comparable to that in the field and even limited at many junctures a sense that there was affirmative leadership and direction for the Hillel movement. While Federations have invested increasingly and importantly in local operations, there has not been a similar commitment to supporting the national infrastructure. The costs of this lag have been substantial.”³¹

The resulting plan outlined goals and priorities for Hillel’s National Center and described current activities and aspirations in detail.

Joel was not only reaching out, he was also reaching in to boards and junior staff, two groups of stakeholders at local Hillels who had been previously been neglected by the National Center. He initiated two annual conferences to develop a common language and direction — one for lay leaders and one for staff. So that Hillels would take staff development seriously, Hillel directors were required to send their staff annually and to pay all associated expenses from the local Hillel budget. Through these two conferences, lay leaders and staff who had been isolated in local Hillels were able to meet others who shared their commitment and acquire new ideas and inspiration.

For students who were strongly involved with Hillel, the National Center revived a summer gathering that had been offered in the past, renaming it the Hillel National Leaders Assembly. At the first such assembly, held over five days in the Poconos, fifty student leaders studied and

debated on issues of leadership, learning, and Jewish identity. It was an intense, deeply inspiring experience. Joel saw it as a way to help students “feel larger than themselves.”³²

The students who came to the conference were leaders at Hillel, but they were the exception. Most students on college campuses were not coming to Hillel at all and were not interested in exploring their Jewish identity. Joel began asking important questions about what local Hillels were doing to reach these students. He captured the issue with a single question raised in his 1989 speech to the Annual Conference of Professionals, during which he asked: “Are we looking to bring the student to Hillel, or Hillel to the student?”³³ This question set the stage for a fundamental shift over the following years in how Hillel would relate to those students who never came to Hillel.

Donors Begin to Fund the Vision

Although B’nai B’rith started out with the intention of providing financial support, it quickly became evident that their financial position was weakening and that Hillel would not be able to grow if the current financial arrangement continued. Joel recognized that obtaining support from other sources was vital, but to secure such funding, Hillel’s reputation needed to improve and college students needed to be seen as an important constituency in the Jewish community. Otherwise, no one would be interested in helping. With this in mind, wherever he spoke, Joel emphasized his new vision for Hillel, and he talked about the changes that he wanted to make. These efforts soon paid off.

Over the next year, Joel secured several major gifts. The first gift came from Jacob Burns, who

³¹ Strategic Plan, B’nai B’rith Hillel Foundations, September 1989.

³² By 2002 the Student Leaders Assembly had grown tenfold to over 500 students.

³³ Speech entitled *Nurturing a Culture of Quality*, given by Richard Joel in December 1989.

was the chairman of the board at Cardozo Law School of Yeshiva University. Burns gave Hillel a \$1 million endowment to be used for programs in ethics. Joel took the \$50,000 that the endowment generated annually and started giving out grants to local Hillel foundations. It was the first time that the National Center had given out grants in this fashion. It was Joel's way of recognizing good directors and good programming, and it began to create the perception that the National Center had something valuable to offer the field. Burns's gift was followed by a \$500,000 gift from Irving and Sarah Pitt of Detroit, who funded a new Institute for Student Leadership. Then David Bittker, the chair of the Hillel Commission, and his wife provided money to create the Arline and David Bittker Fellowship program which would enable a recent college graduate to work on student-related issues at the National Center.

It was only the beginning.

A Quest for Quality

Despite strong support from the staff "cabinet" and other rabbis who embraced the changes Joel wanted to bring about, the new vision he set forth to Hillel staff was not universally applauded. As Rabbi Sam Fishman recalls:

"Richard's vision, his capacity to articulate it, to find new language to describe what we're doing... it was very hard on the old school... To see him in the early days say everything that went before was a waste of time... it was a new day, a new chapter, a new Hillel, new vocabulary... it did not make the senior staff happy to hear that ...[they]

didn't know what they were doing the past 40 years... [and for Richard Joel to say] now I'm here to give you some answers. It wasn't quite that harsh, but that's the way it was heard."

Rabbi James Diamond summarizes Joel's dilemma: "He had a problem of both integrating and synthesizing the past, and yet breaking from the past."

In actuality, Joel never thought that the previous approach had been a waste of time. He recognized, however, that in order to move Hillel forward, he needed a way to convince the larger Jewish community that Hillel was indeed doing something new and that it was a changed organization. Many of the "innovations" he subsequently implemented were not new ideas within Hillel — they had actually been around for a while in various forms. The difference was that in the past they had been done quietly, while under Joel they were announced with great fanfare and with clever nomenclature. One of Joel's singular talents was in using language. He was fond of alliteration and clever phrasing. As just one example, he changed Hillel's mission statement to read: "Maximizing the number of Jews doing Jewish with other Jews." He knew that he could "sell" Hillel to the community more effectively if Hillel's programs were presented in better packaging.

Still, giving new names to old ideas could only go so far in changing the way Hillel was perceived. More fundamental changes needed to be made because perceptions had their basis in reality, and the reality was that the quality of Hillels across the country was uneven. Although many of the Hillel directors that Fishman called

“the old school” were dedicated and talented, some were not. Joel’s early travels to the field had exposed him to Hillels that were thriving and to others that were moribund. As Joel describes it, “Hillel was a system where we were giving money to the local Hillels and there was no accountability for it.” Joel knew that it was essential to focus on quality if he wanted to improve Hillel’s reputation and enact his vision, and to do that some uncomfortable changes in personnel would be required. Certain directors would need to be removed. Rabbi Jeffrey Summit recalls:

“Because he came in from the outside without prior relationships... he was able to fire people.... one of his early major initiatives was a stress on quality assurance in Hillel.”

While Joel was not reluctant to remove ineffective Hillel directors, he used finesse in such situations. When evaluating directors at weak Hillels, he encouraged them to resign rather than firing them outright. The first such incident took place about six months after he was hired, at a Hillel that was, in Joel’s words, “terrible.” Even the Hillel director’s friends and supporters in the local community admitted as much. After the resignation, Joel worried about the reactions of other Hillel directors, but was instead thanked for demonstrating that quality mattered. After Joel successfully convinced a Hillel director to resign at another university, he received a congratulatory letter from the university’s president.

Quality was a desirable goal but a vague concept. Specific standards needed to be established if any concrete changes were going to take place. In addition, the problems were not exclusively

personnel problems. Some Hillels with talented directors still struggled because of problems in the larger system — a number lacked federation support, some had inadequate facilities, and others had weak boards. Personnel evaluations alone did not take these realities into account.

To further his quest for quality, Joel began talking among the staff about a new approach for Hillel — accreditation. The concept was adopted from academia. Joel had firsthand experience with the process of accreditation from his days as an administrator at Yeshiva University. He described his thinking about the concept in his 1990 annual speech:

“periodic evaluations of Hillel will cement standards of quality, will assist the professional staff, in partnership with the campus community and lay leadership, in goal setting and planning. It will also provide professional validation to the community and funding bodies as to the quality of our enterprise.”³⁴

Accreditation would improve local Hillels. But what Joel left unsaid was that he thought it would also make it easier to close down or overhaul Hillels that were weak and to remove ineffective Hillel directors. Mirele Goldsmith, a newly hired staff member at Hillel’s renamed International Center, volunteered to take on this new project, which formally began in 1990. When the initiative was first announced, Hillel directors were understandably anxious about accreditation because they viewed it as a potential threat to their job security. Goldsmith recognized this from the beginning and tried to convince Joel that accreditation would not work if it were imposed on

³⁴ Speech entitled *Nurturing a Culture of Quality*, given by Richard Joel in December 1989.

the directors from above. Accreditation could not be a top-down process. The directors would need to buy in; it could only work from the bottom up.

Once the initiative was launched it quickly took on a life of its own. Philanthropists Edith and Henry Everett expressed a willingness to contribute to the endeavor, and a consultant was hired using the funding they provided. This was followed by the creation of the National Committee on Quality Assurance, composed of a mix of Hillel professionals, academics, students and members of local Hillel boards. To establish standards, the committee organized a retreat with senior Hillel directors. A considerable amount of time and energy was invested. Joel had input into the whole process but he did not direct it.

Within a year's time, the accreditation process was formalized into the Everett Pilot Program for Excellence, and eventually a manual was published.³⁵ The process had four stages. In the first stage, a local Hillel engaged in a self-study, examining all aspects of its operations — governance, programming, personnel, planning and evaluation, communication, finances, physical facility and external relationships. The self-study was followed by a site visit during which a Hillel team interviewed students, staff, board members, faculty, university administration and community leaders. After the visit was completed the team wrote a site visit report. In the final stage the Hillel responded with an action plan in response to the site visit team's recommendations.

The process was initially piloted at three Hillels. The director of each was a member of the board of the Association of Hillel and Jewish Campus Professionals, and each was considered to be one

of the stronger Hillels in the system. The idea was to start at Hillels that would “pass” to help alleviate the anxiety many Hillel directors were experiencing about the process.

Once accreditation was implemented, it turned out that a process that Joel initially conceived of to shake up Hillels turned out to do much more. There were a number of unanticipated benefits, both external and internal, that strengthened local Hillels, the International Center and Hillel's reputation in the Jewish community.

Two groups in particular were influenced positively, Hillel boards and Jewish federations. Many Hillel boards had been only peripherally involved with their local Hillel, and for them the self-study was an eye-opener. For the first time, board members were able to learn about the inner workings of their local Hillel, and they gained an appreciation of the challenges faced by the director. Lay leadership became much more engaged instead of operating under the assumption that their director had the sole responsibility to fix things that were not working.

Some lay leaders also went on site visits, which turned out to be a highly educational process. No longer restricted to the limited perspective of a single Hillel, they were able to assess their own Hillel in comparison with another, and they gained an appreciation of how each local Hillel fit into the national organization. Yet another effect of accreditation on lay leaders was that it laid the groundwork for local fundraising. Many of the problems faced by local Hillels resulted from inadequate financial support. Once board members understood the inner workings and problems of their local Hillel, they were more motivated to raise money locally.

³⁵ Goldsmith (1994).

Federations were also favorably influenced by the accreditation process. For example, when the members of the Washington University site visit team met with representatives of the Jewish Federation of St. Louis as a part of the site visit, the federation learned that the local Hillel they had been supporting was one of the crown jewels in the Hillel system. This was news to them. In the span of an hour, the Hillel's reputation at the federation was enhanced.

In addition, the sophisticated accreditation process Hillel adopted had never been done before in the Jewish communal world, and it impressed federation executives. They could see that Hillel under Joel was serious about improving its operations and the services it provided to students, and that it was doing so in a highly professional fashion. The word started to get out in the federation world that Hillel was undergoing positive changes.

Accreditation also had significant internal effects on Hillel. The rabbis who served as Hillel directors tended to be independent and creative, and the local Hillels reflected this mindset. There was little that unified local Hillels until accreditation came along. Once the accreditation committee had established standards, there was a common language and vision of what each local Hillel should be striving toward. Mirele Goldsmith describes the effects:

“It was a great framework for empowering people and engaging them and getting everyone on the same page as to what the standards were for Hillel. Before this, it wasn't really that clear... you were sort of on your own to figure out whether you were successful or not... there wasn't

really anything to benchmark by... this gave a framework to people of what was expected. That was a big revolution in itself.”

The job responsibilities of a Hillel director changed and expanded as a result of this newly evolving common vision. Prior to Joel, Hillel directors had seen themselves primarily as the rabbi on their college campus and Hillel was viewed as the de facto synagogue, albeit with a different name. Joel saw the job very differently and he used the accreditation process to promote his perspective:

“We're not the synagogue on campus, we're the provoking infrastructure... The students are owners with rights and responsibilities. The professional staff is not the owner. They're supposed to be gifted impresarios, who work together with others.”

As a result, while being a rabbi was an advantage for being a Hillel director, it was no longer considered a prerequisite. The International Center, in conjunction with local search committees, began hiring individuals as Hillel directors based not on their experience as rabbis, but on their skills for running a nonprofit. While there had been directors who weren't rabbis prior to Joel, they were rare exceptions. Susan Behrend Jerison, who was hired by Joel in 1990 and held the title Director of Community Affairs, describes the new job:

“You're running an organization that needs money, sophistication, community buy-in, and board leadership, and needs

to empower students. You're no longer just the typical or traditional rabbi on campus who meets with whoever comes in. The Hillel director has to create a vibrant Jewish institution on the campus, and that [job] wasn't for everyone."

Joel was well aware of the effects of the new "franchise" model on the rabbinic culture:

"These were really caring rabbis, and then we changed the rules on them. They came into Hillel, they wanted to do teaching, they wanted to do counseling. They wanted to have a little *shul*... some of them wanted to be ageless political activists on campus, to have their pulpit, and we changed the rules."

Apart from Joel's new model, additional forces were operating to change the campus environment for rabbis. In the 1960s and 1970s, an increasing number of universities had created academic programs in Jewish studies. Hillel rabbis, who had always taught classes in Judaism to interested students, were now being supplanted by professors teaching similar material (at least in the eyes of students) for college credit.³⁶

The subtle shift created by the growth of Jewish studies programs was far less obvious than the changes brought about by Joel. Many of the rabbis who were Hillel directors reacted negatively to his new framework. They felt that because Joel was not a rabbi and because he had started hiring individuals who weren't rabbis, he was "anti-rabbi." Rabbi Jeffrey Summit describes the prevailing atmosphere at the time:

"There were rabbis who said Richard doesn't like rabbis... he's forcing rabbis out... but in fact, it wasn't that... I never saw him as anti-rabbi. He was pro doing certain things in his retooled Hillel foundation."

As a consequence, some Hillel directors decided to move on to other careers. Rabbi James Diamond describes their mindset:

"There was a whole group of people who bailed out, rejected Richard, and saw him as the beginning of the end, and could not embrace the changes that he brought, did not understand him as a transformational leader, and did not have a clue as to what the transformation... was all about."

Other rabbis did not leave, but just as they resisted Joel's new vision and new language, they also resisted the new paradigm that came with accreditation. They liked their autonomy, did not like the new expectations, and were not very receptive to the idea of outsiders coming to their Hillel and asking questions. Some viewed the new franchise paradigm with derision and felt that Joel was trying to impose a corporate standard across the country that did not recognize the considerable differences that existed across campuses. Eventually, however, some came around when they realized there were benefits to the process. Others had a change of heart when they went on a site visit themselves.

Joel's focus on quality had a ripple effect throughout the Hillel system that extended into the Jewish community. Local Hillels that had operated largely

³⁶ See Jick (2003) for a discussion of the ascendancy of Jewish studies programs.

on their own began to function more and more as part of a national movement. There were shifts in personnel. Hillel was getting more professional and its reputation was slowly beginning to change. However, college students, the reason Hillel existed, were still invisible to the Jewish communal world. It would take a development not initiated by Joel to completely alter this reality.

Concern Over Jewish Continuity

Since the start of the 20th century, the Jewish community had been publishing regular estimates of the size of the U.S. Jewish population. In 1970 and again in 1990, the Council of Jewish Federations sponsored a comprehensive survey to learn more about the characteristics of American Jewry.

The report of the National Jewish Population Survey released in June 1991 caught the Jewish world by surprise. Amidst an extensive array of findings was one statistic that set off shock waves. The data collected in 1970 had indicated that among Jews who had married prior to 1965, only nine percent married outside the faith. However, for the period from 1986 to 1990, the newer findings showed that 52 percent were marrying non-Jews, more than a five-fold increase. Almost instantly, a community that had been preoccupied with international causes like the security of Israel, the resettlement of Ethiopian Jews, and the oppression of Soviet Jewry, began to worry that Jewish life in America had an uncertain future. Previous data had shown that intermarried couples were less likely to raise their children as Jews than in-married couples. Jewish organizations quickly began to focus on ways to influence the Jewish identities of adolescents so that they would grow up to make Jewish choices and raise Jewish children.³⁷

The report issued by the Council of Jewish Federations said very little about college-age Jews. Richard Joel seized the opportunity to make Hillel more visible. In his 1991 speech, Joel articulated his thinking about the population study:

“The recent Jewish population study has focused the community’s eyes on the campus. American Jewry sees in its mirror an assimilating, ignorant persona. It fears for its future... The campus is, for many reasons, a key gateway for Jewish continuity, and a key definer of the Jewish future. This awareness is rising in the community, and for this constituency, the answer is Hillel.”³⁸

Joel convened a national task force to examine the implications of the study for college campuses and asked Seymour Martin Lipset to be the chair. Lipset, a distinguished social scientist at nearby George Mason University and former chair of the Hillel Commission, was an ideal choice. The task force included a broad range of individuals — academics, researchers, Jewish community professionals, Hillel directors, local Hillel board members, students and staff members from the Hillel national office.

The task force’s released its report in July 1992. Ruth Cernea, the Director of Research and Publications for Hillel, was its primary author. The report, extrapolating from the findings of the population study, emphasized the importance of focusing on colleges as a way to solve the problem of assimilation raised by the study. It pointed out that approximately 85 percent of all American Jewish youth attend college and that the college years are an ideal time to locate and reach them as

³⁷ Several years later, the validity of the 52 percent intermarriage rate finding and its implications for Jewish continuity were questioned. However, in 1991, when the study was issued, the figure was assumed to be accurate and the Jewish community responded to the problem accordingly. See Cohen (1994).

³⁸ Speech entitled *We Will Because We Must*, given by Richard Joel in December 1991.

it is the last time they will all be in one place. The college years are also an ideal time to provide them with positive Jewish experiences because they are receptive toward and looking for new ideas and people. Additionally, it is a time when they make decisions about their personal and professional futures.

The report went on to make the case that because of the presence of Hillel, college campuses already had an extensive infrastructure to reach Jewish students, and Hillel also had extensive experience working with them. It then spelled out in detail what needed to be done to engage these students. The Executive Summary boldly concluded by advocating for “a massive, not an incremental, increase of resources for the campus.”³⁹

The report was one approach that Joel was employing to generate attention in the Jewish community for Hillel and the college students it represented, but it was not the only one. Wherever and whenever he could, he tried to make the case for Hillel.

Joel finally found a public platform for his vision through Rabbi Herb Friedman, President of the Wexner Heritage Foundation. The initial catalyst for this development was Louis Berlin, a member of the Hillel Commission. Berlin, a Wexner Fellow who had been inspired by Joel’s vision, wanted to spread the word about Hillel among his contemporaries, other young Jewish leaders. He chose to do so in a highly unusual way by using what he called “guerilla marketing.” At a Wexner Heritage dinner, he snuck into the banquet room early and placed Hillel literature at each place setting. Rabbi Friedman, instead of objecting, reacted positively, since the unorthodox

tactic resonated with his advice to the Wexner Fellows to get involved and do something significant for the Jewish community.

Rabbi Friedman, who was a well-respected figure in the Jewish community, extended an invitation to Joel to come to New York to meet with him. Joel did so and won Friedman’s confidence. Subsequently, Joel was invited to speak at various Wexner events. It gave him a platform to talk about his vision, a new legitimacy, and access to influential people around the country.

Those who were thinking about the Jewish future were coming to recognize Hillel as an organization that was important for Jewish continuity. In his 1992 State of Hillel address, Joel told the assembly: “Finally our agenda is being heard by the Jewish community; indeed, it is being adopted by that community.”⁴⁰

Hillel’s growing visibility in the larger Jewish community had positive internal effects as well. Hillel directors felt increasing pride in their work. Rabbi Jeffrey Summit observes:

“He [Joel] was able to convey to the larger Jewish community the importance of the work that we felt and knew in our hearts was important, and really was able to re-establish our local work as part of a national vision of Jewish education and excellence and renewal. That was... tremendously energizing for local foundations.”

³⁹ Hillel National Center (1992).

⁴⁰ Speech entitled *Shaking the Foundation: Towards a New Partnership*, given by Richard Joel in December 1992.

Chapter 3: Realizing the Vision — 1992 to 1995

A Financial Crisis at B'nai B'rith

When Joel took the job, he received assurances from B'nai B'rith that funding to Hillel would be stable. Although B'nai B'rith's contribution to Hillel's budget was only 18 percent of the total, these funds were essential. Joel described them as “significant budgetary components throughout the system... key to the movement as a whole.”⁴¹

Within several years, B'nai B'rith's financial difficulties had become acute and with 25 percent of their total budget going to Hillel, cuts became a necessity. The first budgetary cut of \$300,000 in 1991 required the International Center to make a 10 percent across-the-board reduction to local Hillels. The Hillel Commission had created the Committee on the Fiscal Future to prepare for these cuts. However, when the next round of cuts was announced in 1992, the committee was not prepared for their magnitude. This time B'nai B'rith would be reducing its allocation by \$800,000, with reductions of a comparable amount to be expected the following year.

Joel reported these facts to Hillel staff in his annual speech, maintaining a positive tone. The

message was gracious and straightforward. He made the point that Hillel should be grateful to B'nai B'rith for their past support, but it was now time for Hillel to help itself. He emphasized the future rather than focusing on the present. He went on to tell the staff:

“We have the power, the opportunity, and I suggest, the sacred responsibility to reshape ourselves and be one of the key forces for Jewish continuity and survival in the emerging century. We are positioned to seize the moment, be all we can be, and command the respect, support, and partnership of the community. It would be foolish to suggest that we are not going through hard times. However, I am confident that short term pain will give way to long term gain. For we're not accepting fate; we're creating our own future. Hillel is positioned to garner substantial support from the community.”⁴²

Although Joel knew the cuts were coming and was doing everything he could to generate support from

⁴¹ *Building on a Culture of Quality.*

⁴² *We Will Because We Must.*

the community, the reality was that the support had not yet been secured. Hillel's financial footing was shaky.

With bigger cuts looming, Hillel was intently focused on replacing the money B'nai B'rith had been providing. Joel refused to pass the cuts along to local foundations. There were three possible sources of money — federations, philanthropists, and Hillel's own fundraising efforts.

Federations had been supporting Hillel for many years, but only locally, not nationally, and it would not be easy to get the various federations around the country to work cooperatively to benefit the entire Hillel system.

Philanthropists had not expressed any interest in Hillel. Joel had managed through his personal relationships to acquire some funding for various projects, but at this point, none of the major philanthropists was giving anything to Hillel's International Center.

As for fundraising, even though a number of Hillel foundations had successfully acquired money locally, often using the funds to build new buildings or renovate existing ones, the International Center had no development department and no one on staff whose job description was solely focused on fundraising. There were also constraints on local fundraising activity as a result of agreements with federations in certain communities. In these communities, local Hillels that received federation support were told that as a condition of the funding they could not raise money locally. In practice, this meant that while a local Hillel like the one at the University of Chicago could solicit donations from alumni

who lived outside of Chicago, they could not solicit potential donors in the Chicago area.

Still the Committee on the Fiscal Future maintained hope. They might have been dealing with the crisis created by the budget cuts, but they were also optimistically working on setting priorities for new money. Hillel took a positive step by deciding to hire its first full-time director of development in 1991. Funding for the position came from Ellie Katz, lay chair of Hillel International's development committee.

Ultimately, Joel knew that the only long-term solution to the fiscal situation was for Hillel to go its own way. He had already been working behind the scenes to orchestrate an amicable parting with B'nai B'rith. It was a necessary development from a financial point of view and he wanted it to happen gracefully. It was also a vital step if he were to fully acquire the credibility he had been seeking for Hillel. The painful reality was that the federations and philanthropists who could potentially provide money were not interested in supporting an organization still linked to B'nai B'rith. The paradox was that he could not become independent of B'nai B'rith without them. Hillel's association with B'nai B'rith was an ongoing liability.

Crafting an Exit Strategy

In the early 1990s, the leader of a prominent Jewish organization challenged Joel during a meeting between the two men. He asked whether Hillel was planning to break away from B'nai B'rith. Joel pulled out a business card that read "Hillel," rather than "B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation." Joel had printed them up specifically

for a scenario like this one, several years before the separation process actually began, because he needed to convince the Jewish communal world that Hillel was on its way to independence.

Joel had realized soon after he was hired that separation was both necessary and inevitable:

“It was never about, my God, we’ve got to get out of B’nai B’rith. It was, we have to be successful... and if B’nai B’rith could help us be successful, it would...be great. I heard right off the bat, though, that nobody was willing to take ownership of Hillel as long as it was B’nai B’rith’s. And B’nai B’rith, it became very clear to me, was going to at best incrementalize us, which means that we’d stay as unsuccessful as we were. And at worst, we’d be getting weaker and weaker, and [they would be] dragging us down with them, not because they wanted to, but there was no other way.”

David Bittker, chair of the Hillel Commission, despite his allegiance to B’nai B’rith, saw the situation the same way. The question was not whether the separation would take place, but how it could be orchestrated. History had shown that B’nai B’rith was not going to let go easily. When Rabbi Oscar Groner had talked publicly about the possibility of separation in the 1980s, B’nai B’rith was so incensed that it pressured him to retire.

However, in the early 1990s, circumstances were very different. B’nai B’rith’s insurance revenues had just plummeted by \$3 million. They had to consider the possibility of letting go

— otherwise, if they continued to fund Hillel and its counterpart, BBYO, it would bankrupt them.

The situation was also different as a result of new B’nai B’rith leadership. Sid Clearfield, Joel’s counterpart at BBYO, had become Executive Vice-President of B’nai B’rith in 1990 following the departure of Tom Neumann. B’nai B’rith had offered the job to Joel first, but he declined, reminding them “you hired me for Hillel.” He had no interest in being an administrator — he considered himself an educator.

Clearfield was not seeking the job, but Joel suggested his name to B’nai B’rith for the position and recommended him highly. Clearfield ended up taking it primarily so that he would be in a position to save BBYO. The financial woes at B’nai B’rith were affecting BBYO as much as they were affecting Hillel, because B’nai B’rith had a policy of treating the two organizations equally.

Clearfield, working with Kent Schiner, the new lay president of B’nai B’rith, deliberated about what to do with BBYO and Hillel given the severe budget shortfalls. Ultimately he decided to continue to support BBYO and reduce funding for Hillel. Despite Clearfield’s history with BBYO and his allegiance to it, he was able to make this decision objectively. The rationale was that Hillel had stronger federation support than did BBYO and had a better chance of surviving on its own. An additional consideration was that Joel had told Clearfield that even though the money from B’nai B’rith made his job a lot easier, he felt Hillel could ultimately survive without B’nai B’rith. The comfortable relationship they had developed as colleagues over the previous years helped to make these conversations frank and productive. Joel recalls:

“I trusted him implicitly. He understood, without our ever articulating it, that the path had to be out. He understood that I was committed not to do this in any way that would de-legitimize or damn B’nai B’rith...there was no other scenario whereby we could succeed, and B’nai B’rith would get stronger.”

Joel was firmly committed to crafting a carefully orchestrated exit strategy:

“There were never any secrets kept from them. We just used the right kind of language in the right kind of way. Because they didn’t want to be responsible for killing off B’nai B’rith, and they didn’t want to be responsible for losing Hillel.

From his side, Clearfield faced a challenge in communicating his decision to B’nai B’rith:

“We couldn’t discuss this openly, even with the board of B’nai B’rith, because if the word got out that Hillel would no longer be part of B’nai B’rith, there would be tremendous reaction within B’nai B’rith. There were many Hillel advocates. People were giving money to be used for both the youth programs. And we couldn’t stand the political battle that would ensue, especially if it became a public political battle.”

Gerald Kraft, a past president of B’nai B’rith, assumed the role of chairman of the committee to oversee the transition, which included the top lay and professional leadership of Hillel and B’nai

B’rith — Joel, Bittker, Clearfield and Schiner. The plan was to reduce the Hillel budget in stages over a period of three years in order to give Hillel an opportunity to find new sources of funding. B’nai B’rith provided a transitional loan to Hillel so that its operations could continue, and the committee approached Martin Kraar, Executive Vice-President of the Council of Jewish Federations, for a comparable amount. The committee, spearheaded by Kraft, also worked on convincing the B’nai B’rith leadership to accept the plan. Bittker recalls telling them bluntly that “this was the only way to go, and there was no other choice.”

Joel indicated to Hillel directors and staff in his 1992 State of Hillel speech that changes were on the horizon, telling the assembled audience:

We are in the midst of building a coalition of major national leadership, the national Jewish communal structure, and B’nai B’rith, which will, we are confident, result in a new governance and funding structure for Hillel, that will be implemented beginning July 1993.⁴³

Independence from B’nai B’rith involved more than just the acquisition of outside financial support to replace the funding that would no longer be in place. There were administrative repercussions. Hillel had always been run essentially as a department of B’nai B’rith. Although Hillel had an administrator and a bookkeeper, it did not have its own bank account or accounting department, and relied on B’nai B’rith to do the payroll, benefits, and vendor payments. Now, Hillel would have to do it all. But

⁴³ *Shaking the Foundation: Towards a New Partnership.*

Hillel did not have anyone on staff who had expertise in this area.

In the spring of 1993, Bittker received a call from Joel. Joel had a top-notch financial person in mind, Aryeh Furst, to create the new systems and the new legal entity, but he did not yet have the money to hire Furst. Joel knew Furst from Yeshiva University, where he had worked with him on budgeting and finance. Bittker advised Joel: “you had better hire him, otherwise you won’t have any money.” Furst started in July of 1993, and immediately began working to create the new foundation and set up all of the necessary systems. The new entity, legally established several months later in September 1993, was called the Foundation for Jewish Campus Life.

The Hillel Commission set up a Transition Advisory Committee in October 1993 to “lay the groundwork for Hillel’s new governance and financial structures.”⁴⁴ The first priorities were to develop a new governance structure and to draft a preliminary set of by-laws describing the involvement of various stakeholders. Joel announced these developments in his annual speech:

“We have established a new corporation, The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, a 501(c)(3) entity, which is the framework for our new governance structure. It will, in the coming months, become the umbrella entity for all the Hillels, and will function as what we now call the International Center. Its board will become the new Hillel leadership body, and is presently in formation.”⁴⁵

For the first time since 1923, Hillel was creating an organizational structure to meet its own needs and aspirations.

A New Initiative from the Council of Jewish Federations

Two developments in the 1980s and early 1990s paved the way for the federations to support Hillel in a new fashion.

An emerging international situation required that federations develop a new way of working together. The massive influx of Jews from the former Soviet Union into the United States made it necessary for federations to come up with a nationwide approach to provide assistance. This necessitated a new financial arrangement that transcended traditional federation turf thinking. Martin Kraar, the Executive Vice-President of the Council of Jewish Federations, was a strong advocate of “collective responsibility,” the phrase used to describe the new approach, which brought the various federations together to accomplish things that individual federations could not.

An arrangement was negotiated by which federations paid into the program according to the size of their Jewish population and not according to the number of immigrants they resettled. In reality, this arrangement meant that larger federations subsidized smaller ones. It was an entirely new financial model and it created a precedent for federations to work together financially to solve problems that were national in scope.

In 1990, when the National Jewish Population Study found a national intermarriage rate of 52 percent

⁴⁴ Memorandum from Susan Behrend Jerison to the Hillel Transition Advisory Committee, January 14, 1994.

⁴⁵ Speech entitled *Therefore Choose Life*, given by Richard Joel in December 1993.

and Jewish continuity became a principal concern, the concept of collective responsibility was again germane. To many, it was clear that the problem, which was national in scope, was not going to be solved by each federation's separate efforts on the local level. Still, various federations established commissions on Jewish continuity and Jewish youth quickly became the focus of their efforts to reduce the rate of intermarriage. There was a general consensus that it was important to be reaching Jewish college students, but there was little agreement on how this should be accomplished.

This was not the first time that federations had paid attention to college students. For a number of years prior to these developments, the Council of Jewish Federations had a campus committee that had not supported Hillel. When Richard Joel was hired and began to interact with it, he did not find it helpful. Joel later described the committee as "a disaster" that consisted primarily of members who just wanted to "dump on Hillel."

Only two or three of the twenty members of the CJF Campus Committee had positive feelings about Hillel and appreciated what it might be able to accomplish if it had the proper support. The remainder of the membership, who viewed Hillel negatively, had some justification for their opinion, based on their many encounters with ineffective Hillel foundations. As Barry Shrage, Executive Director of the Boston federation recalls, the federation executives "couldn't get over the stereotype of the Hillel that was a failure." The committee ended up being disbanded.

Despite these frustrations, Joel continued his efforts to further the relationship between Hillel and the federations, even sending students to the annual

General Assembly. When B'nai B'rith cut funding and the International Center was struggling, Joel, with the help of the B'nai B'rith transition committee, approached Martin Kraar and the Council of Jewish Federations. He had two aims. The first was to ask for a transitional loan so that Hillel could maintain its operations despite the cuts from B'nai B'rith. CJF was supportive and provided \$375,000. The second aim was to position Hillel as a solution to the Jewish continuity crisis identified by the population study. In this Joel was only partially successful.

After the 1990 population study findings were released, the Jewish community's concern for Jewish youth went into high gear. Local federations recognized that they needed to work together. Having decided to focus on how to affect the estimated 400,000 Jewish students who were attending college in the United States, CJF convened the "Task Force on Jewish University Student Services" (JUSS) to develop recommendations for "federations, the North American Commission on Jewish Identity and Continuity, Hillel and other organizations serving university students."⁴⁶

The new JUSS task force, which had representatives from federations, Hillel, and B'nai B'rith, was charged with generating recommendations in five areas: programming to enhance Jewish identity; strategies to improve programming in cooperation with local agencies; ways of involving students in communal activities; methods to strengthen the services provided to students locally, nationally, and internationally; and new models for funding college services.

Joel saw the JUSS task force's mission as a slight. Despite the fact that Hillel had 70 years of

⁴⁶ Council of Jewish Federations (1994a, p ii).

experience providing services to college students, had an extensive infrastructure in place and had changed considerably since Joel had taken over, the JUSS task force did not start under the assumption that Hillel was the sole organization on campus that could address the crisis. Joel recalls his reaction:

“I was all upset...I kept saying, we should be the staff of this. You know, we’re Hillel. Hello? We’re here. And they [CJF] didn’t want to acknowledge that.”

CJF saw the situation differently. Federations had donors who were supporting other college programs, and CJF felt any approach they endorsed needed to be balanced. Individual federation executives did recognize that Hillel had changed under Joel. Richard Jacobs, a vice-president with CJF, recalls the new way Hillel was perceived by the federations at the time:

“[Joel] was there about five years or so when we got into this, and he had already made a difference, and people were beginning to view Hillel in a different light as a real turnaround situation. Therefore, they were saying this is something that we want to invest in because it’s going somewhere. It’s not the same old Hillel...it has a dynamic leader, it’s got vision.”

At the time, there were other Jewish campus organizations vying for legitimacy, although they had neither the history nor the resources of Hillel. So despite the federations’ longstanding financial support for Hillel at the local level and the promise that Joel’s leadership had brought, the Council of

Jewish Federations was not yet willing to bestow upon Hillel an official designation as the central Jewish address on campus.

Michael Rukin was chosen to chair the JUSS task force. Rukin, who had been a member of the search committee that hired Joel, was one of the few people in the federation system with an insider’s understanding of Hillel. For a number of years, Rukin had been involved with, and had served as the Chairman of the Board for the Hillel regional office in Boston. He later became a member of the national Hillel board. Rukin had substantial credibility with his federation colleagues not only because of his work with campus organizations, but because of his lay leader status with Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP) in Boston, the federation with the largest student population in the country. He was also a member of the CJF Executive Committee and a prominent figure in the Reform Movement.

Rukin, CJF staff member Norbert Fruehauf, and Les Levin, a former CJF staff member who was a consultant to Hillel, convinced Joel that he needed to sit tight and let the JUSS task force do its work. In the meantime, since the federations would not be making a decision for some time, the Hillel Commission was trying to figure out how to replace the money B’nai B’rith had been providing.

Access to Philanthropists

While the JUSS task force pursued its mandate, the Hillel’s Committee on the Fiscal Future deliberated over whom to approach for funding. They identified a philanthropist whom they felt would be the ideal supporter for Hillel — Edgar Bronfman, Chairman of the Board of the Seagram

Company and President of the World Jewish Congress. Bronfman was a good choice not only because of his wealth and sphere of influence, but because of his interests. One of the projects he funded was the Bronfman Youth Fellowship program, which sent Jewish teens with leadership potential to Israel.

Joel was encouraged to call Bronfman by the committee, but he was resistant. He recalls telling them:

“Are you crazy? We can’t get Edgar Bronfman... I’ve never met Edgar Bronfman. I don’t know a thing about him.”

Nevertheless, given the urgent need to find money to keep Hillel afloat, Joel reluctantly agreed to make the contact and “steered” himself to place the call. But even before he had a chance to do so, he received a call from a member of Bronfman’s staff. Bronfman wanted to meet Joel. It was such a remarkable coincidence that it would have seemed contrived if it were a plot twist in a novel.

Bronfman had learned about Joel from two people: Bill Friedman, a member of his staff, and Rabbi Avi Weinstein, who was the Orthodox rabbi at Harvard Hillel and director of the Bronfman Youth Fellowship program.

Bronfman, like most other Jewish leaders, was concerned by the findings of the 1990 census, and was looking for a way to do something. He recalls:

“I woke up and said we’re losing the battle...this is very serious. And I thought, well, maybe college level would be a pretty good way to start at

it...and I heard about Richard Joel, and I had not met him, and I asked to meet him...There’s no way ...[that he could reach me] unless he found a way in, because I get a lot of calls that I don’t take.”

The first lunch between the two men did not go well even though Bronfman’s staff had carefully prepared Joel for the meeting with detailed instructions on what to read beforehand, what to do at the meeting, how to eat, and where to sit. Perhaps Joel was too prepared, because after the meeting, he “didn’t feel particularly good about it.” Bronfman described Joel as “stiff and very nervous.” But Rabbi Weinstein and Friedman did not give up. They encouraged Bronfman to take another look, and invited Joel to give a luncheon speech several weeks later to the alumni of the Bronfman Youth Fellowship. Bronfman’s second exposure to Joel turned out differently. Joel was in his own element — speaking to young Jews. This time, Bronfman ended up being “really impressed with his way of dealing with kids.”

After the talk Bronfman approached Joel, shook his hand, and said he would like to get involved. He indicated that he would introduce Joel to people that he knew, but insisted on two things. First, that Joel call him Edgar, not Mr. Bronfman. And second, that Joel keep three words in mind during any introductions: “hope, not fear.”

Bronfman enlisted in the cause not only because of his concerns about Jewish continuity, but because he was impressed with Joel. As he later recalled, “When I met him, I liked him... and I thought he was charismatic and a good leader.”

Joel continued to cultivate the unusual new relationship. Bronfman invited Joel to speak to the Study Group, also known as the Mega Group, a select group of philanthropists organized by Rabbi Brian Lurie, the Executive Director of the United Jewish Appeal. The group, which developed programs for the Jewish community separately from the federation system, had been meeting regularly to discuss issues of concern to the Jewish community. Joel would be the first outsider to ever address the group. He decided to ask them for \$5 million.

The stakes were extremely high. Joel asked Larry Sternberg, a member of the Brandeis University faculty who had been serving as a consultant to Hillel, to accompany him. They spent the night before the meeting in their hotel anxiously preparing. Joel recalls himself being “terrified.” The people with whom they were about to meet were enormously wealthy and could easily provide the funding that Hillel needed. What would it take to convince them to give?

Sternberg’s role at the meeting, held at the New York headquarters of The Limited, philanthropist Leslie Wexner’s company, was to present data about the campus environment to the group, setting the stage for Joel to make the case for the money. Sternberg recalls:

“So what Richard did... was this unbelievable sales pitch, saying we got the kids [on campus] and we have no support to provide the kids with any serious programs...the mission is to bring Judaism to campus, a diverse pluralistic Judaism that’s going to enable these kids to want to be involved as Jews.”

While Joel did not get the entire \$5 million he wanted, he did get something. A surprisingly generous pledge of \$500,000 came from Michael Steinhardt, a legendary hedge fund manager on Wall Street, whom Joel had never previously met. Steinhardt describes why he decided to contribute:

“I was interested in Jewish institutions before that...[I decided] my focus should largely or entirely be on the next generation of Jews, as opposed to the broader mix of various Jewish institutions devoted to a whole range of things. So Hillel made sense as an institution to focus on.”

Edgar Bronfman and his brother Charles, along with several others at the meeting, made contributions as well. David Sachs, former President of the Seagram Company (then owned by the Bronfman family), was subsequently selected by the Study Group to develop the National Supporting Foundation to coordinate and obtain additional philanthropic funding.

Martin Kraar, who was kept abreast of developments with the philanthropists by Joel and Fruehauf, knew it was important for Hillel to repay the loan it had received from the Council of Jewish Federations in order to get future federation funding. He felt that Joel’s unusual background was a major factor in why he was successful in getting the support of the Study Group:

“Here was a guy who had no history; he wasn’t seen as a Jewish communal professional...it was an advantage. He was seen as an accomplished attorney, as an Orthodox Jew, as a charismatic

personality, and as having great style with intelligence, and seemed to be an honest broker.”

Joel announced the successful results of his efforts to Hillel directors and staff at his annual State of Hillel address in 1993:

“A consortium of philanthropists, still in formation, but already including Edgar and Charles Bronfman, Michael Steinhardt, Richard Goldman, Peter May, Leslie Wexner, and others have committed to providing between two and four million dollars a year for five years.”⁴⁷

The figure he quoted to them turned out to be overly optimistic. Joel actually raised about \$1.2 million from the Study Group annually.

While Joel’s various efforts to improve Hillel had been noticed by the federations, Edgar Bronfman’s support was probably the single most significant factor in establishing Hillel’s new image with them. Barry Shrage observed:

“People will judge you not just by what you do, but by the perception of opinion leaders, and when an opinion leader like Bronfman [supports you]..., that is a major turning point. It means you’ve got to be taken seriously. So the perception of success becomes success.”

Aryeh Furst also comments on Bronfman’s impact:

“I would say he was a crucial, crucial factor, not so much because of his money...it was the aura that the guy

commands, the legitimacy that he lends... the people who want to jump on board because of him.”

Nonetheless, Joel’s new relationship with Bronfman and the other philanthropists was not welcomed by everyone at the Council of Jewish Federations. They did not have the kind of access to these individuals that Joel had suddenly acquired. They wanted a piece of the action, and wanted to get the Study Group more interested in federation projects. The philanthropists were notorious for pursuing their own projects without federation involvement.

CJF subsequently proposed that the money not go directly to Hillel, but instead into a new support foundation jointly administered by CJF and Hillel. This foundation would funnel the money from the philanthropists to Hillel and other campus groups. Joel dutifully prepared the incorporation paperwork for this new entity, but in the end it was never implemented. The federations took too long to proceed, there was too much bureaucracy, and Bronfman got impatient with them. He wanted to move forward. The philanthropists’ money ended up going directly to Hillel, bypassing CJF.

Observers feel Joel was successful with the philanthropists largely because of his personal qualities. His relationships with them evolved into genuine friendships. Rabbi Jeffrey Summit observes the dynamic:

“He’s masterful at it... because he tells them the truth; he’s a smart, engaging person; his passion and importance about the nature of the work come across very directly, but for many of

⁴⁷ *Therefore Choose Life.*

these philanthropists, Richard is just a breath of fresh air. He doesn't kiss up to people. He is willing to engage with them on their own Jewish life and Jewish struggle. He actually becomes quite personally connected with them. I know he really cares about Edgar Bronfman and Michael Steinhardt... he becomes engaged with these people in meaningful ways.”

The money from the philanthropists brought some relief, but the federations would need to provide more stable support to Hillel so that it could make it through its financial difficulties and feel confident about its future.

A Place at the Federation Table

As the JUSS task force met and prepared its report on how the federation system would support Jewish services on campus, Joel worked collaboratively with CJF staff and Michael Rukin, the chair. Before issuing its report, the task force shared information with Joel on an ongoing basis. This decision was made for two reasons. First, the task force considered it essential for B'nai B'rith and the Hillel Commission to buy into the report's recommendations. Second, the task force decided that it wanted the federation system to view Hillel as a partner. They were going to recommend that federations, through CJF action, assume much more responsibility for Jewish student services on college campuses. Involving Hillel in the task force's deliberations was an important move politically, since it gave Hillel de facto recognition as the primary Jewish organization on campus even before the report was issued.

Joel understood the federation system well enough to know that federations would not increase their allocations to the level that Hillel required. In his interactions with the task force and the federations, he therefore went along with the task force's recommendation that the federation system would support 40 percent of the Hillel budget. The rest would come from philanthropists and local fundraising.

Joel, as Richard Jacobs recalls, wanted Hillel to be a “cousin” of the federation system rather than a “child” of the system. His decision to accept the 40 percent funding level was, according to Jacobs, a “smart move on his part,” since there would be fewer constraints. In Joel's mind, there was a strong rationale not to ask for more. It did not make sense for Hillel to work on gaining independence from B'nai B'rith so that it could now be wholly dependent on the federations.

The federations had a National Funding Council (NFC), consisting of a consortium of the larger federations that collectively allocated funds to a small number of key national agencies such as the Jewish Community Center Association (JCCA) and the Jewish Educational Service of North America (JESNA). There was a certain logic to having Hillel join the NFC because it would guarantee yearly funding. However, the task force, CJF staff, and the chair of the NFC decided not to advocate for Hillel to become part of the NFC. While that move would have guaranteed funding, it would have limited Hillel to incremental increases, and Hillel required much more than a two or three percent annual increase. It was subsequently decided that the issue would be revisited in the future once the desired funding levels had been reached.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ In 2003, Hillel formally joined the National Funding Council as its largest beneficiary.

The JUSS task force's report, *New Visions for Serving Jewish University Students*, with Rukin as the primary author, was issued in January 1994. It focused on ways to reach unengaged Jewish students, and it offered specific recommendations. As anticipated, it recommended a collective responsibility approach for funding campus services, and it gave Hillel the status Joel had been seeking by endorsing Hillel as "the central federation agency through which campus services are delivered."⁴⁹ Getting to this point was not an easy accomplishment for the task force. There were many critics of Hillel within CJF and the federations who had actually made the case to do away with Hillel and establish a new system for providing Jewish services on campus. But Rukin and others who supported Hillel prevailed. Jay Rubin, a new member of the task force who was then the federation executive in New Haven and later became a vice-president at Hillel's International Center, observes why the debate over whether or not to endorse Hillel ended up in Hillel's favor:

"[Hillel] had total market share. There was no competition... whatever the weaknesses... in the system, Hillel was a brand name that had identity, good, bad, or indifferent... It was on all of these campuses... and nobody was going to replicate that."

The report acknowledged the impact of Joel's leadership:

"Hillel has benefited from new executive leadership during the past five years. This leadership, aided by an increased local

federation concern about the campus, has effected significant change nationally and at many of the 105 campuses where it maintains staffed foundations. Hillel has redefined its mission to include being the central infrastructure through which it and others develop programming for Jewish students."⁵⁰

In previous years, the International Center had only received about \$250,000 from the federations. In view of the decline in funding from B'nai B'rith, the report recommended that Hillel receive \$850,000 in emergency funding in the forthcoming year to maintain its existing services. More importantly, it recommended "a more permanent method for dealing with the needs for campus funding, beyond Fiscal Year 1994."⁵¹ CJF formed a new group to develop a framework for the practical implementation of collective responsibility.

The successor group was created in the form of a working group to develop a funding system and formula that would more equitably support the local, regional, and national system of college services. Rukin pushed hard for this second group. His logic was that in the politically charged federation environment, there needed to be specific financial recommendations, or nothing would happen. Rukin recalls:

"It was clear to several of us that absent a financial implementation plan, this would only be another piece of CJF paper... in the end, money talks... if you [don't] control the purse strings or guide them, then all of the ideology [is] not going to be accomplished."

⁴⁹ Council of Jewish Federations (1994a, p. v).

⁵⁰ Council of Jewish Federations (1994a, p. iii).

⁵¹ Council of Jewish Federations (1994a, p. iv).

The new working group recognized from its inception that it could not ask federations for more money without providing them with a sound justification. It was essential for all of the affected entities — B’nai B’rith, the Hillel Commission, and the federations — to first accept the logic underlying any new allocation system. The working group was concerned that the whole initiative might be defeated if funding needs were presented prematurely.

The decisions that would need to be made by this new working group, also chaired by Rukin, were not only politically charged, but intricate and complex. Although local federations had been providing money to local Hillels and Hillel regional offices since the 1930s, the allocations were idiosyncratic. In the candid language of task force staff member Norbert Fruehauf, the allocation system was “unbalanced [and] crazy.”

Only a few federations considered college students and Hillel to be a high priority among their various allocations. Most did not. As a result, amounts and percentages given to Hillel varied widely across federations. Certain federations had a disproportionate number of colleges and Jewish college students in their area and gave a lot of money to local Hillels. Others had few colleges and few Jewish college students in their area and consequently gave little. Federations in the latter category contributed relatively little to Hillel. A substantial number of the Jewish high school graduates who came from their area attended colleges in other states and, consequently, these federations essentially got a “free ride.”

In addition, federations chose the Hillels they wanted to support — invariably those that were

nearby, primarily in their fundraising catchments. Local federation boards, which had considerable influence, were not inclined to distribute money that had been raised locally to “outside” groups. As a result, allocations from federations to Hillels rarely took into consideration where local high school graduates actually went to college.

The UJA-Federation of New York was a good example. With their large Jewish student population, in 1993–94 they gave over \$1 million annually to local Hillels and the regional office. However, they only supported schools in the New York City, Long Island, and Westchester County areas. Hillels at upstate New York schools like Cornell University and SUNY-Binghamton with thousands of Jewish students received nothing from them, even though almost all of the Jewish students at these schools came from the New York City area. The federations in Ithaca and Binghamton were tiny and not able to support the Hillels in their towns.

The situation was similar at most other schools around the country that were located in small towns but drew large numbers of Jewish students from cities that were some distance away.⁵² These schools had significant numbers of Jewish students but their local federations did not have sufficient resources to fund campus programs.

In parallel with the inconsistent allocation policies of the federations were inconsistencies in the way Hillel’s International Center funded local foundations. The International Center also needed to generate a rationale for setting priorities and redistributing its national pool so that funding would be provided where it was most needed.

⁵² Exceptions include the Chicago federation, which supported the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, and the Boston federation, which supported the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Both schools are several hours away from the respective cities that support them but have substantial enrollments from these cities. Ohio, Florida, and California also had regional support systems.

The uneven funding patterns meant that the CJF working group needed to come up with an entirely new system to support Hillel at all levels. Decisions needed to be made in two areas. The working group needed to arrive at an acceptable collective responsibility formula for determining the amount that each federation would be asked to provide. They also needed to devise a logical system for allocating the money locally, regionally, and nationally. Establishing this system would finally rectify the longstanding inequities that had caused so many problems over the years.

However, before these decisions could be made, accurate figures describing current allocations would be needed. Fruehauf recalls “we did not have a good picture of what they [the federations] were providing locally [or] regionally.” The CJF working group and Hillel collaborated to generate the data, which was an enormous undertaking. It was the first time that a national picture of federation funding to Hillel had ever been assembled.

The allocation system that the working group ended up devising, along with all of the data on what federations were contributing to Hillel, was presented to the federations in a second report,⁵³ issued within a year of the first report. Both reports were approved through satellite TV linkups by the CJF Board and by the Delegate Assembly, which consisted of representatives from every local federation. Obtaining this approval was a huge achievement, fraught with considerable risk. In both instances, as Fruehauf recalls, Rukin made the case for Hillel to the federations in a “masterful and inspirational” fashion.

The recommendations of the second report were highly favorable for Hillel. The International

Center would receive \$1.3 million per year, an increase of over \$1 million from the figure provided two years earlier. This amount would increase each subsequent year for seven years, taking inflation into account. At the local level, Federations had given a total of approximately \$10 million during the previous fiscal year, and the report recommended that the figure be doubled to \$20 million over a seven-year period. To arrive at this amount, the working group, with the assistance of Joel and Hillel staff, developed budget projections of what Hillel would need in order to provide adequate services nationally. The figure came out to about \$50 million per year. Since the federations had previously agreed to support 40 percent of the Hillel budget, \$20 million would be needed.⁵⁴

After struggling over an equitable collective responsibility formula, the working group decided that the amount each federation would be asked to give to Hillel would be based on two factors, the amount that each federation took in annually and the size of its Jewish population. Specifically, three-quarters of the allocation would be determined by annual revenues, and one-quarter by population.

The working group came up with a complex arrangement for funding all three levels of Hillel by creating regional consortia. Federations were assigned to one of fourteen regions based on “migration” data indicating where high school graduates tended to go to college. Local Hillels would still receive funding from local federations. At the regional level, a Regional Responsibility Pool would be created to allocate money for under-funded Hillels in the region. The Hillel

⁵³ Council of Jewish Federations (1994b).

⁵⁴ The \$20 million target was never reached. Ten years later, Hillel’s 2004 annual report listed the total income from federations at \$15.6 million (Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, 2004).

International Center would determine how these funds would be distributed. At the national level, a National Collective Pool would be established to support the Hillel International Center.

In the first year, most of the local federations contributed the required amount to the National Collective Pool. Compliance was around 85 percent. There was little national oversight of the funding pattern at the local and regional levels.

In theory, the funding model was elegant. In practice, however, there were implementation problems. The voluntary aspect of collective responsibility was the biggest stumbling block. Federations may have agreed to the model in principle and signed off on the report, but when it came time to write checks, not all of the federations contributed their agreed-upon share. New York, for example, which was already contributing a large amount of money, only increased its allocation slightly in the first year.⁵⁵ Most of the federations in New Jersey were unwilling to support the process because as a group they were against the principle of collective responsibility. In order to generate support from reluctant federations, Rukin, task force leaders, and CJF staff conducted consultations on a regional basis and met with local federation lay and professional leaders.

The compliance problem on the part of the federations was not specific to Hillel. There had been a “tug-of-war” between the local system and the national system for other collective responsibility projects. Each federation had its own local interests and commitments, so when a federation was asked to give money to a national project, it had to decide whether or not to take

funds from local priorities and apply them to new priorities stemming from the national collective.

The contributions may have been voluntary but opting out was not viewed positively. One large federation, encountering this dynamic, referred to its collective responsibility contributions as “mandatory electives.”

CJF staff members had to invest time and energy to get federations to pay up. CJF staff time was also necessary to help facilitate relationships among federations in the newly created regions. However, given their other obligations in the system, CJF staff members had little time for such efforts.

Apart from the compliance problem, there was also a problem getting federations to cooperate and plan with each other on a regional basis. Most had little or no experience engaging in inter-federation planning and funding. Only some of the new regions ended up collaborating successfully.⁵⁶

Despite the implementation problems, the working group report, along with the earlier task force report, brought about major shifts in the relationship with the federations that were highly positive for Hillel. Now the entire Hillel system — not just local Hillels — would be receiving money from the federations, and the system would receive a substantial, ongoing increase. The federations were now much more interested in what was happening on campus and recognized the importance of focusing on college students. Also, for the first time, Hillel and the federations would have a cooperative working partnership. In the federation world, Hillel finally had, to quote Fruehauf, “a place at the table.”

⁵⁵In subsequent years, the New York federation eventually met its national share, but not its regional/local share.

⁵⁶Texas federations began to work together despite the lack of prior relationships. Florida, Ohio, and Connecticut already had prior experience with joint planning and funding of college programs. In contrast, the statewide California region was problematic because the Los Angeles and San Francisco federations had a prior history of difficulties. Both of these federations had in the past funded college programs beyond their catchment area. The Southwest and Southeast regions never came together.

These necessary shifts in funding, planning, and organizational leadership were all strategized by Rukin and Joel with the involvement of the task force, the working group, and CJF staff.⁵⁷ One significant shift, however, was implicit, not spelled out in the report. The prior federation constraints on local fundraising by national Hillel and to a degree by local Hillels were no longer appropriate. It did not make sense for federations to prohibit Hillel from raising funds in certain communities if federations were going to be providing only 40 percent of Hillel's budget. Rabbi Richard Marker, who helped develop the new arrangement with the federations as a Hillel staff member of the working group, expressed his view of the situation:

“The ‘not in my backyard’ syndrome works if everybody’s only making local decisions. Once you have a national process, there were no longer any backyards that were not part of the arrangement... this was the breakthrough that allowed Hillel to begin to develop a serious fundraising effort because it essentially got the federations to buy in.”

Jay Rubin recalls that Joel used to joke about the constraints: “where did the federations think we were going to find donors — on Mars, or in major Jewish communities?” Campus Hillels were now viewed by the federations as local agencies. Like any agency that received federation support, they were expected to adhere to local federation fundraising policies.

Hillel, from its side, was about to dramatically improve its own fundraising activities so that it could generate the other 60 percent of its budget. Rabbi Herb Tobin, Hillel's new Vice-President for

Development, would take full advantage of the new arrangement with the federations.

Major New Support from Philanthropists

On July 1, 1994, the new Foundation for Jewish Campus Life began operating as a separate entity from B'nai B'rith with an interim board consisting of Richard Joel, Michael Rukin, David Bittker, and Ellie Katz and with new administrative systems developed by Aryeh Furst. Joel sent a memo to the members of the transition committee, describing the current circumstances as “a classic ‘good news — bad news’ situation.”⁵⁸ Hillel was surviving but it had ended the fiscal year approximately \$600,000 in debt, with \$375,000 owed to CJF and about \$225,000 owed to B'nai B'rith. The shortfall was due to the fact that although the philanthropists had pledged, only Steinhardt had paid. No system had been put in place to collect the money.

The financial problems would have been much worse without Furst. Furst had proven to be a vital hire. In a year's time, he had not only built the structures for the new Hillel, but he had kept close watch on the finances during an unstable time and freed Joel from daily worry and from dealing with administrative and financial details. Rabbi Bill Rudolph recalls Furst's thankless role: “He was good at shielding Richard from the day to day — are we going to make it or not?”

Rabbi Herb Tobin, the new vice-president of development, was another important addition. Hillel had hired its first director of development in 1991, but over time it became clear that the person wasn't working out. Rabbi Sam Fishman

⁵⁷ Key CJF contributors include Martin Kraar (Executive Vice-President of CJF), Richard Jacobs and Norbert Fruehauf (CJF staff members for the task force and working group), Bill Berman and Robert Aronson (Detroit), David Sachs (New York), Steve Hoffman (Cleveland), and Jim Rosenstein (Philadelphia; chair of the National Funding Councils). David Bittker also played an important role.

⁵⁸ Memorandum from Richard Joel to the Hillel Transition Advisory Committee, July 15, 1994.

recalls that the individual “didn’t meet Richard’s extraordinarily high expectations.” The search for a new vice-president of development lasted a year and eventually led to Tobin, who became the first new hire at the Foundation for Jewish Campus Life. Fishman describes the background of the hire:

“This really was an extraordinary gamble — [Richard Joel] hired probably the best fundraiser in the country, a guy named Herb Tobin of Boston... a maverick... but extraordinarily effective... Richard said ‘I told my board you can pay him more than me... because he’ll make me look so good, you’ll want to pay me more in the end in terms of salary.’ And he did. Herb in his own strange way... professionalized the whole development field for us.”

Tobin was not currently working in the Jewish community when he took the position, although he had previously done fundraising for several Jewish communities. His expertise was in fundraising for higher education. He had been involved with Hillel for several years, but strictly as a volunteer and at the local level when he served on the board of Boston University Hillel. At that time he worked in development at Boston University Medical Center. In 1991, when Hillel hired its first development person, he became an advisor to Hillel’s national development committee and got to know Joel. They subsequently had a number of informal conversations, which eventually led to the job offer.

At the time, Hillel’s fundraising efforts amounted to about \$5 million a year nationally, which

included all of the money raised by local Hillels. Roughly, this amounted to an average of \$50,000 per Hillel, and even though a few had raised considerably more, the amounts were not enough to make a meaningful difference in what a local Hillel could accomplish. Although a few Hillels had started capital campaigns, overall the organization’s fundraising activities were acutely undeveloped and were not coming close to meeting the organization’s needs. Tobin describes his decision to take the job:

“I agreed to go to Hillel at a time when it was desperate...it was a failsafe opportunity. It was the first time in my professional career that I went somewhere that I absolutely, unequivocally couldn’t make anything worse than what it was. It was as bad as it could be.”

Tobin’s first priority when he accepted the job was to convince Joel that he needed to meet with prospective donors, telling him “we can’t raise money sitting in Washington.” On Tobin’s second day they took a train to New York, having arranged five appointments, including one with Steinhardt. At this point, Joel had only met Steinhardt at the Study Group meeting, and did not really know him. Tobin felt strongly that it was important for Joel to thank Steinhardt, cultivate a relationship, and let him know how his money was being used. There was no plan to ask for more money.

Joel was a reluctant fundraiser. One of the features that had attracted him to the job initially was the assurance from B’nai B’rith that he would not have to raise money. When that changed, Joel acknowledged that he was a novice:

“Along the way, I realized that I had to be involved in the development of resources. It was a very rude awakening.”

Joel may have been a novice at fundraising but he was highly skillful at coming up with new ways to reach college-age Jews. Fundraising to him was not a goal in itself but a way to bring his ideas to fruition. On the 6:00 a.m. train to New York that day, Joel shared his latest idea with Tobin for reaching Jewish students who stayed away from Hillel. He had been envisioning a Jewish “Peace Corps” which would involve hiring recent college graduates who would work for local Hillels for a year and spend most of their time on campus. The genesis of the idea had been the Arline and David Bittker Fellowship, which funded an outstanding college graduate to work at the International Center for a year. Joel’s latest idea was not on any wish list, nor was it part of Hillel’s strategic plan, but Joel had always bounced new ideas off of his staff and he and Tobin had a few hours to kill. Tobin was frank with Joel. He thought the idea was impractical given Hillel’s financial straits.

Joel and Tobin were unsuccessful at raising any money from their first four prospects. Steinhardt was their final stop of the day. In the middle of their meeting with him, while he periodically glanced at computer screens flickering with current market data, Steinhardt abruptly changed the subject. Tobin recalls that Steinhardt asked something like: “If money were no object and you could run any program you wanted, what would you do?” Joel, “without missing a beat” as Tobin described the meeting, immediately launched into a description of his Jewish Peace Corps idea and what the individuals he hoped to hire would be doing:

“I want to train the hell out of them... and I want them to spend a year working for Hillel, never setting foot in the Hillel. I want them to go to the fraternities, and the sororities, the student unions... the dorms, and I want them to engage students... I don’t care if [the students they reach] never come to Hillel.”

Joel went on to discuss the specifics. He would need \$25,000 per year for two years for each of 20 campuses, plus another \$25,000 for someone to administer the program. Steinhardt offered to provide matching grants of \$12,500 for each campus if the local Hillel would raise the other half. From his side, this was exactly the sort of program he liked to fund — one that dealt with young Jews who were not involved with Jewish institutions. Steinhardt describes his interest in the project:

“The idea was [that] Hillel was not reaching all that many people. Here was an approach where it would reach people who wouldn’t ordinarily be reached.”

Tobin and Joel, with some trepidation, agreed to seek the matching funds despite the organization’s financial difficulties and the novelty of the idea, which had not yet been discussed with local Hillel foundations. They walked out of the meeting with a commitment for more than half a million dollars for a program that was so new it did not yet exist on paper.

Despite their spectacular success, Joel was not satisfied. He turned to Tobin after the meeting, and Tobin recalls he remarked:

“Well, that solved that problem, but I still don’t have money to run the place. We’ve got to get more money.”

During the first few months that Tobin was on the job, Joel and Tobin spent most of their time on the road. Tobin recalls the routine:

“The development program was me and Richard running around... just going and going and going until we could find some money. That was it. There was no choice. It was as unsophisticated as that.”

Within a few months, Joel and Tobin secured another major gift from Charles Schusterman of Tulsa. They had received several calls from Schusterman’s staff indicating that he was interested in getting more involved in Jewish philanthropy. Joel recalls how the gift came about:

“At a certain point, I had a call, and I was told that a Mr. Charles Schusterman from Tulsa would like to meet with me... in came this interesting man in shirtsleeves, and suspenders. He basically sat down, and told me that he was a major philanthropist prepared to give some major money and that he was interested in the agenda that we had... We were invited to go out to Tulsa to meet with him, and Herb Tobin and I went out there for the day... At a certain point he said, ‘I like what you’re doing... I want to go out and talk to my wife.’ ...Herb and I were deciding was it going to be \$10,000? Was it going to be \$25,000? He came back in and pledged a million dollars.”

Teaching Local Hillels to Fundraise

The money from Schusterman ended up being used for infrastructure. Yet while philanthropists like Bronfman, Steinhardt, and Schusterman had proven to be essential for Hillel’s survival and growth, there did not seem to be any others like them. During his fundraising expeditions with Joel, Tobin had some realizations:

“It became clear to me... that at any point in time we’re only going to be able to raise so much money on a national basis. It takes a special kind of person to understand the world in macro terms ...[but] there were great possibilities on a local basis... there were in excess of four million Jewish college graduates in this country, all with some kind of potential concern about Jewish college life.”

Tobin understood the mechanics involved in reaching these college graduates from his experience helping the Hillel at Boston University:

“You need data. If you don’t have data, you don’t have the basic road map of fundraising. People didn’t go to college, they went to Brandeis, they went to Harvard, they went to Ohio State, they went to UCLA. You have to go campus by campus and extract the Jewish alumni. Closely related to that, you have to extract parents of current Jewish students — again, another obvious group of people.”

At this point in time, each local Hillel typically had a database of several thousand names, mostly

individuals in the local community who gave small donations. Tobin's challenge was to get each local Hillel to expand these lists to include alumni and parents. Hillel staff would need to acquire data from each school and then analyze the lists.

Since the lists obtained from schools would initially include all parents and alumni, not just those who were Jewish, there needed to be some way to identify the Jews. Tobin, again drawing on his experience with the Hillel at Boston University, developed a novel software program that could extract possible Jewish alumni from the lists, which for large universities might have as many as half a million names. This "ethnification" software flagged a name if it matched any one of the 2,000 most common Jewish surnames. Each Hillel now had a tool to generate a list of as many as 50,000 or 60,000 alumni who had a likelihood of being Jewish. In addition to the software, Tobin also developed direct mail, telemarketing, and public relations packages. The International Center paid for it all using the money from Schusterman, and exported it to the local Hillels.

But this was only the first step. Tobin knew from his experience in development that Jews give generously to higher education. If, for example, 10 percent of a particular school's alumni are Jewish, it was very likely that more than 10 percent of the total alumni giving came from these Jews, and several of these donors would be especially wealthy and generous. All that money was going to the university — it wasn't going to Hillel. Local Hillels needed to learn about who these people were. They had a history of giving and might be persuaded to give to Hillel. Tobin recalls how he encouraged local Hillels to create a development awareness on their campus:

"Who's giving money? Who are the major Jews?... Every school should identify the top 100 to 250 prospects for annual giving."

Tobin relates that this entire process was an utterly new way of thinking for local Hillels:

"Nobody was thinking about development in a strategic way... I was dealing with 90 social workers, rabbis, educators. Fundraising wasn't in their job description. It's not something they wanted to do. It's certainly not something they knew how to do, and they weren't sure why they needed to do it... the first challenge was to get them to take this seriously."

To make the process attractive and overcome resistance, Tobin and Joel made three offers to local Hillels. First they agreed to indemnify local Hillels for certain fundraising costs. An initial mailing to alumni and parents might require an outlay of \$50,000. Would it bring in more than it cost? To alleviate this concern, Hillel International promised to reimburse local Hillels for any money they might lose. However, if a local Hillel made money, it would get to keep it all. It was a "can't-lose" proposition.

The second offer was to support a regional development person's salary. Once the money started coming in, Tobin and Joel encouraged regional Hillel offices to build momentum by hiring a part-time or full-time director of development. Hillel agreed to pay one-third of the development person's salary. The third offer was to provide consultative support free

of charge to local Hillels that were engaging development professionals.

Although some of the local fundraising initiatives lost money at first, the eventual result was that most local Hillels ended up dramatically increasing their level of development activity and doubling the amount they raised annually. In some cases, local Hillels became even more successful at fundraising than the Hillel International Center. The Hillels that were most successful were the ones on campuses with strong alumni loyalty. If alumni cared about their school, they were more likely to support their school's Hillel.

Initially, it took a lot of energy to get the fundraising process going. Tobin recalls:

“You’ve got to get them to do it, to trust you, to trust the process, to see the strategic importance of it, the financial importance. That’s how it grew.”

Much of the success was due to Tobin’s coaching. He helped local Hillels understand how to work with their universities:

“[We] taught the Hillels how to work creatively and intelligently and thoughtfully with the host universities to try to extract as much as they could from the university development office...How do you get access to the data? How do you get access to research? How do you get access to university development and key lay leadership? How do you combine your needs with the university’s needs? How do you get exposure in alumni magazines and alumni publications?”

Tobin’s efforts also strengthened local boards. The involvement of Edgar Bronfman and other philanthropists in concert with Hillel’s new image enabled boards to recruit new members in their communities who would not previously have been involved.

Now that local Hillel foundations were capable of doing their own fundraising, Joel generated a new phrase, “interdependent self-sufficiency,” to describe the relationship he wanted to see between the International Center and local foundations:

“My hope is that each Hillel will be as self-sufficient as possible, with the full realization that the only way that happens, on an ongoing basis, is if we’re all interdependent.”

All of this was taking place in the context of the new relationships with the federations. Tobin describes the dynamic:

“We learned ...to exist synergistically with the local federations... working cooperatively, never at loggerheads... at a time when federation campaigns were flat, the federations had not only agreed to basically double their allocation to Hillel, but at the same time we got licensed to go hunt on our own as well...we learned to do it creatively.”

A Successful Fundraising Collaboration

About a year after Tobin was hired, Joel came up with another bold idea to raise money. He proposed the creation of a visiting committee, which ended up being called the Board of

Governors, that would be separate from the Hillel Commission. It would consist of donors who were willing to give an unrestricted minimum of \$50,000 to Hillel annually. Tobin liked the idea of a visiting committee but thought the amount Joel had in mind was “off the wall.” Tobin was not the only one who was skeptical. Joel remembers “everybody told me I was a madman.” But the one person who really mattered, Edgar Bronfman, agreed immediately when asked to be the chair. The new board was an immediate success and attracted a number of new contributors. Joel describes his logic in creating the board:

“These are people who don’t want to come to meetings, who don’t want to do hands-on managing, but they do want to invest in something that gives them the right kind of return on their investment. They want to be treated with respect...they want to be asked for their guidance in areas where they can add value.”

Bronfman had a major role in determining the board’s composition. He describes the process of bringing in new members:

“We have a meeting and then I invite them, either then or subsequently, to come on the Board of Governors after Richard and I have discussed it. He usually doesn’t bring anybody here that I wouldn’t want. And it’s not just a question of money.... If I see somebody that feels something internal about the fact that this is a good thing to be doing... to me this is very special, and I need people who also feel that this is very special to be on the Board of Governors.”

Bronfman also proved to be helpful in another way, paving the way for a national direct mail campaign. He offered to write a letter to the 110,000 contributors to the World Jewish Congress, encouraging them to donate to Hillel. Typically, a 1–2 percent response rate for direct mail solicitations was considered excellent. Hillel got a 5 percent response from the WJC. Bronfman also asked Abe Foxman at the Anti-Defamation League for a list of names, and again, the response rate greatly exceeded the usual level.

Hillel now had three new fundraising approaches that were highly effective — local campaigns, the Board of Governors, and the national direct mail campaign. Tobin’s talent as a fundraiser in combination with Joel’s strategic mindset proved to be a powerful combination. Tobin reflects on the partnership with Joel:

“Richard was a brilliant thinker, [a] brilliant strategist... it was an incredibly creative and productive partnership... he gave me a blueprint that I could go out and build, and I never questioned the blueprint. I had great confidence in him, great confidence in his vision.”

The collaboration with Furst was equally important. Furst helped build the infrastructure “from the inside out.” At key times he would say “don’t spend the money, we don’t have it.” At other times he would say “if you need it, we’ll find the money, don’t worry about it.”

Ultimately, Joel’s vision, Furst’s resourcefulness, and Tobin’s creativity would support a new paradigm and model for reaching Jewish students

on campus. Tobin describes the result of the successful fundraising efforts:

“[The money] unleashed all kinds of wonderful, creative forces. It really allowed the organization to grow thoughtfully, and to mature, and to do very wonderful things.”

A Two-Track Mind

The morning after Joel returned from his successful visit with Michael Steinhardt, he requested a meeting with Linda Mann Simansky, the Director of the Center for Student Services at Hillel’s International Center. He told her about the new \$550,000 gift, and asked her to immediately start a search for twenty qualified graduating seniors who would be interested in the new Steinhardt Fellows program. The catch was that since it was already spring, and the academic year would soon be coming to an end, she had only a few weeks to do it. By the end of May, she recalls, Hillel had a “pretty stellar group of people in place.” The new fellows, who were expected to do a challenging job without prior professional experience, were then trained at the Leaders Assembly that August.

Recruiting and training the new Steinhardt Fellows was only part of the challenge. Joel also had to find twenty Hillel foundations willing to come up with the \$12,500 needed to match Steinhardt’s pledge on short notice. The local fundraising initiative that Tobin would be developing was not yet in place.

Joel sent faxes out to the entire Hillel system describing the new initiative. Within four days he

had responses from 34 campuses. Twenty-three were selected. Simansky comments on the rapid and positive response:

“At that point, Richard had built up enough trust and respect in the field that people had a sense that he had a vision...if he had tried in the early 1990s, I don’t think the response would have been as great.”

The Steinhardt Fellows program, which later came to be called the Jewish Campus Service Corps, was the first large-scale program to emerge from Joel’s successes with the philanthropists. It had a substantial impact on Hillel’s capacity to reach and engage Jewish students. Joel described it as a “strike force for experimentation.”⁵⁹

From the very beginning of his tenure at Hillel, Joel had been trying to find ways to reach those Jewish students on campus who never came to Hillel and who lacked a strong Jewish identity. In 1992, he announced the creation of the National Outreach Task Force, describing it as a focused approach for “connecting with the unconnected.”⁶⁰ Finding the right language was essential for this effort because it required getting Hillel directors to think about their work on campus in a totally different way. He played with various phrases to encapsulate the essential distinction between approaches for those who had a strong Jewish identity and approaches for those who did not. In his 1993 State of Hillel speech, he began talking about the differences between “American Jews” and “Jewish Americans,” and asked Hillel staff to think about “tradition” and “triage” as two different programming tracks to approach these two types of students.⁶¹ By the following year,

⁵⁹ Speech entitled *Jewish Identity: Towards a Consciousness of Kedusha*, given by Richard Joel in December 1994.

⁶⁰ *Shaking the Foundation: Towards a New Partnership*.

⁶¹ *Therefore Choose Life*.

around the time that the Steinhardt Fellows program came into being, he had found the right alliterative phrase for the two tracks — empowerment and engagement.

Students on the empowerment track were the ones coming in the Hillel door. These were the students that the rabbis had always worked with. They were already Jewishly engaged, and Hillel's responsibility was to help them with their individual Jewish journeys. Joel told students at the 1995 Leaders Assembly:

“For those students who come and say I want to do Jewish, Hillel better damn well give you the resources, the teachers, the guides, the rules, the space, and the oomph to do it.”⁶²

In contrast, there was a much larger group of students, those on the engagement track, who needed to be engaged where they were. Engagement was not the same as outreach. Outreach was a term Joel disliked, because it implied that students who did not come to Hillel needed to be brought in so they could become like the regulars. Instead, these students, the “silent majority,” needed an entirely different approach. He told the students at the Leaders Assembly:

“They don't want to be you... they are afraid, they are intimidated, they are uncomfortable, they don't wear their Jewishness as comfortably... They have not written off Jewishness, they just don't know how to connect to it. And they are not looking to connect to it... the job is to get out there and create opportunities for every Jewish individual... to engage

with their Jewishness, to be able to feel pride and comfort in it... to feel comfortable enough to own it... we have to provide ways for them to make it theirs.”⁶³

To accomplish this goal, students on the engagement track needed to be reached where they lived their lives on campus — in the student union, in student organizations, in fraternities and sororities, in dorms, at coffee shops. Rabbis were not the best people to accomplish this. Peers were ideal, hence the structure of the Steinhardt Fellows program. Hillel consultant and Brandeis professor Larry Sternberg describes the logic:

“The reason that it would be assigned to people who just graduated was that they were close in age and could easily relate to [these students]... the barriers to establishing relationships would be way down.”

Beyond the primary goal of connecting with the unconnected, Joel saw the program as having several additional advantages. It would give an elite group of students a stimulating and responsible position for a year, and these students might then become inspired to pursue careers with Hillel or in Jewish communal service. It was also a low-risk endeavor, since there was no long-term staffing commitment.

Rabbi Bill Rudolph recalls that the whole notion was “a pretty radical idea” for the Hillel directors. Rabbi Jeffrey Summit maintains that it “transformed the culture of Hillel.” The Jewish Campus Service Corps fundamentally changed the way that Hillel

⁶² Speech given by Richard Joel at the August 1995 Leaders Assembly.

⁶³ Speech at 1995 Leaders Assembly.

foundations conducted their activities. Across the country, the first group of Steinhardt Fellows interacted with over 10,000 Jewish students who would not otherwise have sought out a Jewish experience or come to Hillel. The program shifted the focus of local Hillel foundations from the students who were regulars to the students who were not and it helped them start thinking in new ways about how to reach unengaged students. In addition, the program created a youth culture at Hillel. Students saw that the organization valued young talent and their primary contact with Hillel was now someone of their own generation.

There were several positive, unanticipated effects on fundraising as well. The program taught local Hillels how to leverage funding. With half of the money for the program guaranteed, it became much easier to raise the other half. Plus, potential donors became more receptive to fundraising efforts for other purposes. Rabbi Jeffrey Summit describes how the program helped in solicitations:

“This engagement work is tied in many ways not only to Hillel’s image on campus, but also our fundraising approach. If we were only serving a small percentage of people on campus... we have a relatively limited appeal to those we go out and speak to about the importance and the nature of our work. If our express goal and our staffing structure is to engage the Jewish community on campus, and we’re actually directing resources and staff towards that goal...then we could talk to a much broader constituency.”

The Jewish Campus Service Corps would be the first of a number of new programs that became possible as a result of the new funding, and these programs would in turn create a justification for further funding. Herb Tobin describes the way this process worked:

“Fundraising wasn’t only about just raising the money for these programs, it was also being there, helping to shape the strategy, helping to show everybody how the interplay between fundraising and creativity and ideas and programs comes to bear. Sometimes you get the money and you push a program along. Other times you get the idea of a program, you need the resources. But there is always a point of convergence. Sometimes the tail wags the dog as much as the dog wags the tail.”

Hillel was now poised to move in a number of new directions.

The New Hillel

By early 1995, Joel’s vision had been largely realized and Hillel was, for all practical purposes, a new organization. Hillel was now independent from B’nai B’rith and had stable federation and philanthropic support. Local foundations were developing the capacity to generate their own funding and were improving in quality as a result of the accreditation program. Many local Hillel foundations had conducted successful capital campaigns and built new buildings. Jewish college students were now seen as an important group that deserved attention and support from the Jewish community.

As Jonathan Sarna notes, from an historical perspective, the connection between local Jewish communities and the college students in their midst had now come full circle. At the beginning of the century, before there were local Hillel foundations, communities had taken responsibility for local students. With the creation of Hillel, communities no longer took this role. The new arrangements with the federations brought communities and college students together again in a new way.⁶⁴

Hillel's independent status became public knowledge when B'nai B'rith issued a press release describing its new relationship with Hillel. According to the press release, B'nai B'rith's Board of Governors had given "unanimous approval" to the new arrangement.⁶⁵ B'nai B'rith would still provide \$2 million a year to Hillel, would continue to provide it with rent-free office space, and would have representatives on the Hillel board.

With the work of his two federation task forces completed, Michael Rukin became the new lay chair of the Board of Directors of the Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, succeeding David Bittker. Given the new arrangement with the federations, he was a logical choice. Joel recalls:

"Michael was a just a pro at working the federation system, and at teaching me to think in terms of those systems."

The new gender-balanced board was composed of Hillel professionals and lay leaders, and representatives from the federations and B'nai B'rith. It also included 12 students. Rukin and Edith Everett had insisted on the strong student representation because, as Rukin relates, no one

on the board had "been on campus as a student for at least thirty years."

This new governance structure, in combination with the federation support and philanthropic gifts, enabled Hillel to sustain its existing programs and take major new steps. The Jewish Campus Service Corps, now under the direction of Rhoda Weisman, had already had a positive effect on local Hillels. Steinhardt agreed to renew it for a second year, this time at 45 campuses. Charles and Lynn Schusterman provided funding so that Hillel could become established in the former Soviet Union. Edgar Bronfman and Richard Joel began to visit campus Hillel foundations, traveling on "Hillel One," Bronfman's private jet.⁶⁶ They always invited local federation leaders to these visits, and engaged in Torah study with students to demonstrate that the study of Hebrew texts could be both fun and stimulating. They began to use the phrase "Jewish renaissance" rather than Jewish continuity, since it seemed to resonate more with students.

Hillel's transformation under Joel did not come about without controversy. With professional administrators increasingly replacing rabbis as Hillel directors, with an explicit franchise model as the template for the organization, and with recent graduates as the primary contact for most students, there were a number of complaints.

The shift in Hillel leadership from academically-oriented rabbis to professional administrators was, in the view of some Hillel veterans, a mistake. On many campuses, the rabbis had established strong personal relationships over time with key faculty and university officials. They had recognized that

⁶⁴ Sarna (email communication, September 22, 2005).

⁶⁵ Press release from B'nai B'rith, January 27, 1995, *B'nai B'rith Board Approves New Hillel Plan by Acclamation*.

⁶⁶ By the time Richard Joel left Hillel in 2003, he and Edgar Bronfman had visited nearly 100 campus Hillel foundations.

apart from the students they serve, universities are also forces for social and political good in society. These rabbis, by drawing on Jewish values and by engaging in intellectual discourse, had forged strong linkages between Hillel and the intellectual life on campus. The local Hillel at such schools had been seen as an important contributor to the mission of the university. With the shift to professional administrators and a greater focus on students, on some campuses these important linkages weakened.

There were also complaints that Hillel had become too standardized, corporate, and impersonal. With so much centralized at the International Center, some maintained, the individual needs and specific circumstances of each campus were sometimes neglected. Martin Kraar compared what Joel tried to do at Hillel with his own experiences running CJF:

“Richard... assumed that he had paternal control over the independent nature of the Hillels around the country and could deliver a franchise product.... He quickly learned... [you] can't do that. It's like me trying to make all the federations alike.... You have to learn to relate to them as different.”

Additionally, with the new emphasis on the engagement track, recent college graduates with little background in Judaism — rather than rabbis or professionals with deep Jewish learning — often ended up being the primary contact point with students. Hillel's International Center accordingly provided Steinhardt Fellows with careful training and extensive program resources. The Judaism that students encountered through these Steinhardt

Fellows was contemporary and creative, sometimes far removed from traditional Judaism.

Not everyone viewed this development positively. One commentator, a former Steinhardt Fellow unhappy with the new direction and with pre-packaged programs, referred to the new Hillel as the “mass-marketing of Jewish cultural expression.... the Jewish world's Starbucks or Blockbuster.”⁶⁷

In the 1920s, when Rabbi Benjamin Frankel started Hillel, he had consciously opted for a religious model that would have a more narrow appeal rather than a cultural one that would be more universal. His logic was that Hillel would be most effective and would be accepted more readily if it were to become a Jewish campus ministry like other ministries. Seventy years later, Joel had shifted the entire organization to the cultural model. Hillel was no longer just for those Jewish students who wanted a place on campus to practice Judaism — it was now for all Jewish students, regardless of their degree of Jewish identification or level of engagement. It is not yet clear what the long-term implications of this shift will be.

Joel would continue as Executive Director for another eight years, building upon the new structure and relationships. Despite his organizational gifts, his heart remained with the students, whom he always viewed as the future of the Jewish people. Joel had been working as a youth leader since high school and his talent for understanding and connecting with young Jews was at the center of his efforts at Hillel. All of the political battles he fought, all of the relationships he cultivated, all of the funding support he sought, and all of the administrative decisions he made were for them.

⁶⁷ Deutchman (1999, p. 22).

Case Analysis

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Introduction

As part of a study of Jewish life on college campuses conducted by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University,⁶⁸ our research team recently had the opportunity to visit Hillel foundations at colleges and universities across the United States. Walking into these Hillels, we knew that we were entering the institution envisioned and created by Richard Joel. His legacy is everywhere — in the posters proclaiming the mission, “Maximizing the Number of Jews Doing Jewish with Other Jews,”⁶⁹ in the unmistakable presence of the Steinhardt Fellows, in the new buildings named for the mega-donors who made them possible, and in the staff comprised of many programming and development professionals but few rabbis. It is easy to take these elements for granted, as if they had always been there. But the Hillel case history makes clear that were it not for the actions of leadership, today’s reality would look very different.

Reading the Case History

There are a number of ways to read the Hillel case history. It is a compelling narrative with a presumably happy ending, and the reader may be tempted simply to read it as one would a short story. It is also an instructional manual that encodes principles of leadership and of organization change and growth. Read this way, it calls upon the reader to match elements of the story to organizational theory and, in doing so, to increase understanding and appreciation of both.

In either case, the reader must keep in mind that the retrospective telling of a case history gives the appearance of constant progress toward an inevitable outcome. In hindsight, choices seem obvious and the flow of events appears planned and logical. This perception is an artifact of case histories. Inevitably in recounting the past, witnesses level some details and sharpen others; they conflate events; they compress time; and they create a coherent tale. Importantly, they lose sight of alternatives that were considered but not tried or those that were tried but failed to take hold.⁷⁰ To appreciate fully the events recounted herein,

⁶⁸ Sales and Saxe (2005).

⁶⁹ This mission statement was replaced in 2005 after our research visits were completed. It currently reads “Hillel’s mission is to enrich the lives of Jewish undergraduate and graduate students so that they may enrich the Jewish people and the world.”

⁷⁰ c.f., Kanter (1983).

the reader needs to remember that, at the time, the course of events could not have been predicted and their outcomes were far from certain.

Beginning and Ending Organizations are dynamic systems that mature through various stages of life, but case histories necessarily look only at a particular period of time. In many regards, the choice of beginning and endpoints is arbitrary. Beginning the Hillel case in 1988 and ending it in 1995 produces a story that moves from a set of complex difficulties to an optimistic note of resolution.

Lacking systematic study of the “pre-history” of Hillel’s remaking, we might wonder why a move toward innovation had not occurred sooner, since the social shifts and resultant problems had become clear decades earlier. Were the organization and its leadership averse to innovation, seeing little advantage in change? Or were they ignorant or naive in the ways of change? We also are not privy to the inner workings of B’nai B’rith in its decision to hire Richard Joel. Did they think of him as a “turnaround artist,” someone brought in to manage crisis, and restructure and renew a troubled organization? Or did they see him as a “visionary leader,” who would come to embody the values and spirit of Hillel?

At the other end of the case history, insufficient time has passed since Richard Joel’s departure from Hillel and too little data have been gathered to understand how the changes he effected played out over time. Will the franchise model hold as the best organizing principle for Hillel or has it been applied to the campus setting too literally? Once established as the central address on campus, will Hillel be able to maintain its position of

dominance in the field? Without a strong rabbinic presence, what will happen to the Judaic mission of the Hillel foundations? There have been critics of the remade Hillel and research shows that the difficulties of reaching large numbers of Jewish college students and building a strong Jewish presence on campus persist. The research also confirms that questions regarding the long-term impact of the changes recounted herein are very much on the minds of people in the field.⁷¹

As with any organization intervention, the changes undertaken under Richard Joel’s leadership will undoubtedly have both positive and negative consequences. Even though the “jury is still out,” the reader should think critically about the possible upsides and downsides of the changes entailed in the remaking of Hillel. For better or for worse, how might the development of a fundraising function, the implementation of national accreditation, the division between the engagement and empowerment of students, or the redefinition of the organization’s mission to incorporate any and all Jewish-related activities play out over time?

Shifting Figure and Ground In recounting a case history, actors necessarily are figural and the historical context is ground. As a result, we are more likely to attribute causality to the actors than to the situation in which they find themselves.⁷² Yet, circumstance and luck are clearly at play in the remaking of Hillel.

In terms of the broader societal context, the 1980s were a good time to be Jewish in America. Institutional anti-Semitism had virtually disappeared and anti-Zionism and anti-Israel activism had not yet emerged as a major force on college campuses. It was a time when it

⁷¹ See Deutchman (1999) for one critique and Sales and Saxe (2005) for a summary of the research.

⁷² For the classic reference on attribution theory, see Kelley (1973).

was possible not to dwell on the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, and terrorism, but rather to focus on a positive model of being Jewish. In the early 1990s, the National Jewish Population Survey confirmed the high intermarriage rate in the American Jewish population and it galvanized the community's energy around issues of Jewish identity and continuity. To put it simplistically, Hillel could pitch a positive Judaism at the same time that the NJPS made federations and funders more willing to listen and respond. These were also the years in which independent philanthropists and foundations emerged as leading players in the Jewish world, ones who could and would set their own agenda and build their own institutions. Hillel was a beneficiary of all of these trends.

In terms of the organizational context, B'nai B'rith declined during Richard Joel's tenure and was too weak to assert any claims on Hillel. In the 1980s, when Rabbi Groner talked about the possibility of separating Hillel from B'nai B'rith, he was pressured to retire. In the 1990s, B'nai B'rith, with its fortunes diminished, was forced to entertain the possibility for the sake of its own survival. Some have also suggested that the conflict between the Hillel rabbis and B'nai B'rith had gone on for so long that it had exhausted everyone to the point where little energy remained for continuing the battle. These conditions contributed to the possibility that a new leader could accomplish changes that his predecessors could not have.

Visionary Leader versus Turnaround Artist

The first reaction to the case history might be to see Richard Joel as a visionary or transformational leader.⁷³ Such leaders are passionate about their

work and the organization, and they inspire others by creating new meaning and a positive vision of the organization's future. They come to embody the organization and tend to remain there for an extended period of time. The case history fits well with this theory. However, it also fits well with other models of leadership, most notably that of the turnaround artist. Turnaround artists are hired to move organizations from loss to profit and they generally do so through major structural change. They are known to wield a strong arm, make tough decisions, and keep an eye on the bottom line. They come into the organization for only a short period of time to accomplish the turnaround and then leave for their next challenge. Applying these distinctive models of leadership to the Hillel case can elucidate leadership principles underlying the story of organization's remaking. It can also affect how we assess what happened.

Visionary Leader Visionary or transformational leaders lead through the power of their vision and through the manipulation of symbols that help people find meaning and order in their experience.⁷⁴ Richard Joel's use of language is the first clue that he was comfortable operating in this mode. He "talked rabbi" to the rabbi-directors. He changed the name of the national office to the "National Center," to emphasize Hillel's mission-driven character. He introduced the terms "engagement" and "empowerment" to reset the course of the organization's mission, staffing, and programming. He began talking about a Jewish "Renaissance" rather than the trials of Jewish continuity. "You know," he told the interviewer, "when you tell a young person that they should be proud of continuity, and be part of continuity, their eyes glaze over. If you say, 'you have to be an

⁷³ For a full description of these terms see, for example, Rafferty and Griffin (2004) or Tichy and Devanna (1986).

⁷⁴ See Burns (1978); Bolman and Deal (1991); Rafferty and Griffin (2004); Yukl (1998).

architect to the Jewish Renaissance,’ you’ve got their attention.” New language is obviously insufficient to effect change, but in the hands of the right leader, with the right structural moves, it is a powerful tool.

In the same vein, he reframed the mission of the organization. Staff issues were most prominent when Richard Joel assumed the directorship, but he knew, from day one, that the primary focus of his efforts had to be on the students and not on the staff. Throughout his tenure, he kept the students at the heart of the work. He met with them regularly when he visited campuses; he re-established the Assembly for student leaders; he put students on the International Board.

This consistent focus on the core mission has both emotional and practical importance. Students are the reason that the organization was founded, the reason why it exists at all. They form the organization’s story. Research is clear that organizations with a compelling story are stronger than organizations struggling to figure out what they stand for and why people should care about them. It is the students’ “story,” their needs and their potential, that convinced the community to make Hillel a priority. Shifting the focus to the students and keeping it there was a major piece of organization reframing that, ultimately, was tied to the successful remaking of Hillel.

As well, the focus on students undoubtedly sustained the leader. Richard Joel never envisioned himself a fundraiser, a budget guru, or a rabbi. But he did see himself as a youth worker. In our recent study of Jewish life on college campuses, we met Hillel directors in a similar plight.⁷⁵ They came into campus work

attracted by the academic setting and the opportunity to work with students. But they soon found themselves developing lay boards, wooing funders, building coalitions with the community on and off campus, hiring and firing staff, and so on. At the time of our study, several were thinking of ways to get back into direct service, back to the parts of the job that had attracted them in the first place. It is clear that such leaders need to be in personal touch with the core mission of the organization in order to sustain themselves through their mundane managerial functions.

In his classic study of leaders, Bennis concluded that the first two basic ingredients of leadership are a guiding vision and passion.⁷⁶ First and foremost, he found, leaders manage the dream. They are able to create a compelling vision, one that takes people to a new place, and then to translate that vision into reality. They have a clear idea of what they want to do — professionally and personally — and the strength to persist in the face of setbacks, even failures. Others have noted that organization innovators push in part by repetition, by mentioning the new idea or the new practice on every possible occasion, in every speech, at every meeting. Because there is a great deal of “noise” in organizations, people are constantly trying to figure out what is important. Leaders have to communicate strategic decisions forcefully enough and often enough to make their intentions clear.⁷⁷ From his first meeting, in July 1988 in St. Louis with the Hillel rabbis’ cabinet, Richard Joel articulated a vision and his passion for the vision. He articulated the vision at the General Assembly in New Orleans that same year. And again when he called David Bittker, asking him to chair the Hillel Commission. And again at

⁷⁵ Sales and Saxe (2005).

⁷⁶ Bennis (1989).

⁷⁷ Kanter (1983).

the Hillel Annual Conference of Professionals at the end of that year when he made his first State of Hillel speech. And again at every chance he had.

More recent research has found that a leader who will bring the organization to new heights must “maintain unwavering faith that you can and will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties, *AND at the same time* have the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”⁷⁸ Richard Joel also models this duality. He was honest about what was but also effectively conveyed what could be. Each of his annual “State of Hillel” speeches was an attempt to frame the current reality and to motivate the organization for the future. At his first such talk, for example, he spoke of the weak Jewish knowledge and identities of college students and he acknowledged the low priority the community placed on this age group. He then articulated a vision and a dream for reaching students and rebuilding the organization. All of his annual speeches are characterized by this combination of truth and inspiration.

Turnaround Artist The structural perspective of the turnaround artist assumes that organizational problems can be resolved through restructuring or developing new systems.⁷⁹ And, indeed, much of what Richard Joel accomplished was in the realm of structural change. The largest such change was the separation of the organization from B’nai B’rith, Hillel’s long-time benefactor and host. In addition, Richard Joel created and implemented an accreditation system that would help standardize the local foundations’ operations and raise the quality of their work. He built a dual board structure to include a management board and a leadership

board. The management board was developed on a university and corporate model such that Joel became the president and CEO, both reporting to the board and voting on the board.

Importantly, Richard Joel centralized Hillel, creating a national umbrella organization over the local foundations. Given the nature of the American Jewish infrastructure, tension between local units and national offices is pervasive, but it was resolved at Hillel with a strong arm from national leadership.

From its inception, Hillel had been a decentralized organization with autonomous local units. There was effectively no national office and the only unifying force was the rabbi-directors who held the common ground through their shared concerns and their relationships with each other. Changing this structure meant shifting power away from the rabbi-director network. It also required envisioning what a national organization could be and determining how it could serve as an umbrella for its diverse local units, what kinds of services it could provide, and how it could justify taking a percentage of the monies allocated to Hillel. The local foundations, for their part, had to decide that the benefits of being a part of a national system outweighed those of remaining autonomous. Rhetoric alone would not lead to such a change.

Training opportunities were created for leaders from across the country, convening them in a way that only a centralized office could. Grants were handed out to local Hillel foundations, offering something of value to the field while also rewarding those who fell in line. When B’nai B’rith cut its allocations to Hillel, the national office absorbed the loss, protecting the local foundations

⁷⁸ Collins (2001, p. 13).

⁷⁹ Bolman and Deal (1991).

from the shortfall. In later years, the national office created software, direct mail, telemarketing and public relations packages that the local Hillels could use in raising funds for their programs. They offered to indemnify local Hillels for certain fundraising costs, reimbursing them for any money they might lose in a fundraising appeal. The national development professional coached local Hillels in how to work with their universities, how to use data, how to build a local development function. In all of these interventions, the focus was on what the local foundation could gain from its association with the International Center rather than the other way around.

On the administrative front, Richard Joel turned around the finances of the organization by restructuring its funding. For almost 70 years, Hillel did not have a director of development. The first new hire of the new Foundation for Jewish Campus Life was a full-time fundraiser, a potent symbol of the changes that followed.

It must be remembered that until recently, Jewish organizations operated as if fundraising belonged wholly in the domain of the development department. In federations, a key example, the fundraising and planning/allocations side of the organization had a virtual if not physical wall between them, and even lay leaders found themselves on one side of the organization or the other. As well, until recently, there was a divide between religious and communal organizations in the Jewish community, with most synagogues and rabbis only minimally engaged in fundraising. To the extent that Hillels saw themselves as religious institutions, they functioned like synagogues in terms of their programming and their orientation toward their work. The rabbi-

directors were teachers and spiritual leaders. They were not managers, change agents, or fundraisers.

In the past 20 years, the situation has changed. Today job descriptions include fundraising as a key responsibility for the heads of nonprofit organizations. Synagogues routinely undertake strategic planning initiatives, and capital and endowment campaigns. Rabbis who never thought of themselves as fundraisers are working with consultants and learning to make the pitch and to close the deal. The Hillel case history occurs on the cusp of this shift. It begins with rabbi-directors who had no thoughts of fundraising, and a new leader — a lawyer and academic — who was uncomfortable in the fundraiser role and sought assurances that it would not be part of the job. The case history is an object lesson in what has become a widely accepted truth. Fundraising is everyone's job.

All of these structural changes, as innovative as they were for Hillel, were drawn from other arenas. Accreditation was a concept borrowed from academia, as was the dual board structure and many of the fundraising strategies that were implemented. The franchise model came from the business world. The idea for the Steinhardt Fellows was stimulated by the Bittker Fellowship, an existing Hillel program, and by the Peace Corps. Borrowing from diverse realms, or lateral thinking as it is called, is one of the key marks of creativity. In this regard, B'nai B'rith was correct in its assessment that it needed to hire an outsider, not because this person was distant from the organization's politics but because he could bring in new ways of thinking. Joel was able to pull from diverse life experiences as youth director, lawyer,

and academic and to restructure Hillel based on the knowledge that these experiences had afforded him.

Human Resources: A Case in Point

An examination of Richard Joel's management of Hillel's human capital provides an arena for distinguishing his role as visionary leader and as turnaround artist.

Leadership research makes clear the critical importance of leaders getting people on their side.⁸⁰ Repeatedly we read that Joel entered a setting in which the reception and outcome were uncertain. Each time he emerged successful, having won over the group with his honesty, personality, and vision. These efforts proved strategic on his part. Long-time, esteemed rabbis and Hillel professionals “bonded” with him and lent him needed credibility as he started out at Hillel. The relationship he built with Sid Clearfield, who after some years as Joel's counterpart at BBYO later became the head of B'nai B'rith, facilitated the spin-off of Hillel from the parent organization. The philanthropists, with whom he established genuine personal friendships, remained committed supporters of him and the organization. Hillel was an organization built primarily from human resources — from the rabbis and their network — so it should be no surprise that much of what was accomplished in its turnaround resided in the personality of the leader and his ability to “get people on his side.”

The underlying issue in this endeavor is trust, at the base of which is the leader's integrity.⁸¹ The early years of the case story can be understood as a series of trust-building moves to create the foundation for

change. The proof text appears in the sixth year, when Richard Joel invited the foundations to take part in an experiment with outreach workers (the Steinhardt Fellows). The response, we are told, was rapid and positive — a sign that the trust between the international leader and the local directors had indeed become well-established.

Importantly, getting people on one's side also entails removing those who do not fit. In his influential study of executives who had led their organizations from good to great, Collins expected to find that these leaders began their change efforts by setting a new vision and strategy. He found instead that they “first got the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats — and then they figured out where to drive it.”⁸² Although not readily in evidence in the case history, Richard Joel was a tough executive who fired or forced the resignations of those who did not share the new vision or could not meet standards in the new environment.

Finally, the case history shows how Richard Joel employed taskforces and commissions. Such structures, which provide a platform for volunteer engagement and a bridge between lay leaders and professionals, are common in the Jewish community. Richard used a group approach for strategic planning (in 1989), quality assurance (in 1990), study of the implications of the National Jewish Population Study for college campuses (in 1991), design of new approaches to student engagement (in 1992), transition to independent status after separation from B'nai B'rith (in 1993), and examination of Hillel's fiscal future (in 1994).

⁸⁰ See, for example, Bennis (1989).

⁸¹ Bennis (1989).

⁸² Collins (2001, p. 13).

This is not to say that he believed in consensus decision-making or in workplace democracy. In fact, Richard Joel was not much of a team player, generally preferring centralized decision making. Weber (1968) had been an early influence on Joel's thinking, convincing him that leaders needed to use a number of approaches, including terror.⁸³ He was, in this sense, a political ruler who intentionally alternated the use of carrot and stick. At the same time, he did not believe in "lonely leadership." "I believe in collective vision," he told the interviewer. "But collective vision doesn't mean you do focus groups... It means that at a certain point you have to say, here's where we're going...make this your vision, too...come join with me in this."

The personnel story is thus an intriguing *mélange* of the turnaround artist and the visionary leader — a leader who established taskforces and commissions and who used coercion and reward to prevail, but also a leader who developed and supported the right people and won them over through the power and passion of his vision. There is always more than one way to respond to any organizational problem or dilemma, and leaders are limited only to the degree that they are unable to reframe the experience and to look at it from different perspectives.⁸⁴ If anything, the Hillel case history validates this point, showing how different approaches — simultaneously applied — were needed to address effectively the complex tangle of problems facing the organization.

The Nature of Change

Richard Joel did not believe in "incrementalism" but rather saw the need for revolutionary change

at Hillel. It is difficult to say if the case history recounts a revolution. Research on good-to-great organizations makes clear that such transformations never happen in one fell swoop but rather are the result of relentless pushing in a single direction.⁸⁵ The case history seems more in this mold. There does not appear to be a single defining battle, grand program, major innovation, or miracle that made the difference. Rather, we see a month-after-month, year-after-year effort to effect change. This effort produced three different types of results: dead ends, ripple effects, and spirals.

Dead Ends The story shows us two dead ends, efforts that pushed in a particular direction but led nowhere. One is the B'nai B'rith Strategic Plan produced during Richard Joel's first year on the job. The plan was frank about the history of Hillel's relationship with B'nai B'rith and the federations; it described current activities in detail; and it outlined goals and priorities for Hillel's future. No action resulted from this document, which appears to have been shelved. The second is the idea for a CJF-Hillel Foundation that would funnel money from the philanthropists to Hillel and other campus groups. The foundation never materialized. There were undoubtedly many more such dead ends that occurred during these years. Some actions produce zero results.

Ripples Other efforts lead to multiple outcomes, like ripples in a pond. For example, the accreditation program, designed to provide quality control, had a series of secondary effects. It made it easier to remove ineffective Hillel directors; it engaged lay leaders and educated

⁸³ Weber (1968).

⁸⁴ Bolman and Deal (1991).

⁸⁵ Collins (2001).

them about Hillel; it created appreciation for how each local Hillel fit into the national organization; it enhanced Hillel's reputation at federations and laid the groundwork for local fundraising; it served a unifying function, creating a common language and vision of what each local Hillel could be. Likewise, the Steinhardt Fellows program had numerous ripple effects. The program may have had mixed results as regards its primary purpose of reaching the unengaged, but its secondary results were clear. It got local Hillels to think about doing things that had not been done previously; it presented a new program funding model; and it began to change Hillel's image among college students.

Spirals Under certain conditions, change can produce spirals. When first seen, these conditions appear to be untenable situations. For example, Hillel had a poor reputation, which meant that it was unable to attract funding, which meant that it could not do the programming that would help improve its reputation and thereby attract more funding. What a leader sees in such deadlocks is that breaking in at any point can produce an upward spiral effect. In this way, the more money Hillel raised, the more creativity it was able to bring to its work. The creative elements, in turn, attracted more funding. The spiral was set in motion and success bred more success.

Sometimes the interlocking of elements creates a puzzle that is difficult to solve. For example, in the remaking of Hillel, an increased emphasis was placed on outreach and, therefore, on cultural and social programming. One of the main thrusts of the new Hillel was "the mass marketing" of Judaism and the obvious measure of success

became the number of students reached. Under these conditions, if Hillel increased programming with heavy Jewish content, participation would drop and donors would balk, which in turn would threaten funding for more content-rich events. However, if Hillel increased programming of a popular, secular nature, it would increase student participation, but run the risk of betraying its mission.⁸⁶

Assessment of Change

The Hillel case history ends on a note of great change and positive resolution. We need to be clear, however, that Hillel's problems were not fully and permanently solved. Our recent study found that just over half of all Jewish college students at the schools we studied have *no* contact with organized Jewish life on campus. The Hillel foundations are still of uneven quality. Some are vibrant and exciting; others are struggling, even moribund.⁸⁷ Hillel continues to grow its fundraising capacity but now faces the reality that some donors who were excited to contribute during the turnaround are less interested in supporting an already successful organization.

Hillel was transformed, but some of the change appears to entail single loop learning.⁸⁸ The foundations learned to engage in the new behavior called for by a given innovation, but they did not learn how to become innovating organizations. At the beginning of the case history, we learn that the campus environment had changed significantly from the 1960s onward but that Hillel had not. Our recent college study found that Hillel campus professionals have incorporated the changes they inherited from the Richard Joel years but they still

⁸⁶ See Deutchman (1999).

⁸⁷ Sales and Saxe (2005).

⁸⁸ Argyris (1978).

have not developed the capacity for environmental scanning that would enable them to understand and respond to emerging trends on campus. Moreover, a report recently produced for Hillel explained the importance of its becoming a central clearinghouse of information on American Jewish college students.⁸⁹ As with environmental scanning, the creation of such a database would provide invaluable information on trends related to the target audience. The report sits on a shelf. One might question whether Richard Joel's leadership created singular change or whether it taught the Hillel professionals to tune into the changing times and to innovate accordingly.

A final piece of evidence on this question concerns leadership succession. Collins describes a hierarchy of leadership that distinguishes good managers from those who have led their organizations from good to great.⁹⁰ At the pinnacle is the "executive," the one who builds enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. A central trait of these leaders is that their ambition is primarily for the organization and not for their own aggrandizement. Desiring to see the organization even more successful in the next generation, the executive engages in a key behavior: grooming and preparing a capable successor. Importantly, when Richard Joel left Hillel, he left a void at the top. There were no heirs apparent and no senior leaders ready to assume the mantle.

Putting the Case to Work

A case study animates theory through the thoughts and actions of the personalities in the story. *The Remaking of Hillel* illustrates key

behaviors and attitudes both of visionary leaders and of turnaround artists. It demonstrates the great versatility and flexibility needed by a leader of change — the ability to engage people but also to wield unilateral power, to think in terms of vision but also in terms of structure, to inspire but also to tell the hard truth. I have focused on these two models of leadership because I was intrigued by how sharply each differs from the other and yet how necessary each was to the outcome.

Other theories and analytic frames can similarly be brought to bear on this case and the reader is invited to use the material creatively in this way. For example:

- What happens to the founding values and structure of an organization as the organization matures and adapts to changes in its environment? Consider how Hillel's initial values (e.g., denominational pluralism, local autonomy, rabbinic culture) shaped the early years of the organization, were redefined during the Richard Joel years, and today contribute to debate over the future direction of Hillel.
- How does the concept of the "tipping point" apply to organization change?⁹¹ In the Hillel case, notice how winning over key leaders became the first step toward large-scale change and how success led to success. It has been said, for example, that the pervasive revamping of local Hillel lay boards resulted from the involvement first of Edgar Bronfman and then of other prestigious national leaders, who gave cache to Hillel work and enabled local foundations to reach out to the best and brightest lay leaders in their own communities.

⁸⁹ Sternberg et al. (2002).

⁹⁰ Collins (2001).

⁹¹ Gladwell (2000).

- How do leaders deal with the tensions that attend change — the struggle between the forces of stability and of change, between denial and acceptance of reality, between fear and hope, between the role of manager and of leader?⁹² In the particular case of Hillel, a key tension was between depreciating the past and breaking from it entirely or valuing the past and integrating it into the future. Consider the ways in which the Hillel case provides a positive and/or negative example of an organization able to embrace these tensions.
- How does a political frame explain organizational life, leadership, and change? The political frame is concerned with power, conflict, and coalitions within and between organizations. The leader who understands and operates out of this frame needs skills in three areas: agenda setting, networking and forming coalitions, and bargaining and negotiating.⁹³ Much can be gleaned by interpreting the Hillel case history as the story of a political leader competing successfully for power and scarce resources.

Pursuing questions such as these and delving into the literature that informs them can produce rich learning about leadership and organization change. It would be a mistake to conclude from this case that troubled organizations need only to find a savior — a larger-than-life leader who can change the organization's fate. Rather, the case stands as clear demonstration of the dynamic nature of systems and the ongoing need to steer organizational evolution. It teaches us well that building an effective organization requires not only vision, strategy, and luck, but also untiring, relentless effort.

⁹² Tichy and Devanna (1986).

⁹³ Bolman and Deal (1991).

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Appendix A: Method

The Hillel case study is based primarily on 26 face-to-face and telephone interviews. Relevant reports, memos, speeches, press releases, periodicals and other documents were also incorporated.

Interviewees and their primary affiliation during the time period in which they appear in the case study are as follows:

Louis Berlin, Hillel
 David Bittker, B'nai B'rith and Hillel
 Edgar Bronfman, The Samuel Bronfman Foundation
 Sid Clearfield, B'nai B'rith
 Rabbi James S. Diamond, Hillel
 Rabbi Samuel Z. Fishman, Hillel
 Rabbi Herb Friedman, The Wexner Heritage Foundation
 Norbert Fruehauf, Council of Jewish Federations
 Aryeh Furst, Hillel
 Mirele Goldsmith, Hillel
 Richard Jacobs, Council of Jewish Federations
 Susan Behrend Jerison, Hillel
 Martin Kraar, Council of Jewish Federations
 Richard Joel, Hillel

Rabbi Richard Marker, Hillel
 Larry Moses, Hillel
 Seymour Reich, B'nai B'rith
 Jay Rubin, Hillel
 Rabbi William Rudolph, Hillel
 Michael Rukin, Council of Jewish Federations and Hillel
 Barry Shrage, Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston
 Linda Mann Simansky, Hillel
 Michael Steinhardt, The Steinhardt Foundation
 Larry Sternberg, Brandeis University
 Rabbi Jeffrey Summit, Hillel
 Rabbi Herb Tobin, Hillel

Interviews, which lasted an average of 90 minutes, were recorded and transcribed. Quotations in the text of this case study not accompanied by a footnote are taken from these transcripts. Interviews were open-ended and informally structured. Interviewees were asked to describe their own role, their relationship with Richard Joel, and their recollections and interpretations of what happened during their association with Hillel. The few discrepancies among accounts were resolved through further inquiry.

The manuscript of the case study went through three stages of fact-checking and review. First all of the interviewees, as well as others mentioned in this case study, reviewed for accuracy those sections of the text in which they appeared. The full case study was then reviewed by Richard Joel. The final version of the case study was reviewed by a select group of individuals consisting of academics knowledgeable about nonprofit management and Jewish communal professionals familiar with Hillel and its role in the community.