

## **Network Organizing: Rethinking Communal Leadership for Rabbis\***

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Today we are witnessing massive shifts in demographics, culture, and behavior. Our young people are global citizens, individually empowered through rapidly evolving technologies, and increasingly capable of designing and customizing their own experiences. As NYU professor and author Clay Shirky states, all of this means that “organizations no longer have a monopoly on organizing.” As the Pew Research Center’s 2013 report “A Portrait of Jewish Americans” illuminated, so many Jews today are proud to be Jewish while simultaneously rejecting the institutions of Jewish life.

As representatives of the Gen X and Millennial generations, committed both personally and professionally to Judaism and to strengthening Jewish communal life, we see a need for rabbis to understand, embrace, and become skilled at leading networked communities. Working on the ground in both Jewish and secular settings, we have seen and experienced how a networked approach to community leaves a profound impact on people as they find purpose and become strengthened through trusting relationships and collaboration.

As those in our generations (as well as those who are older and younger) seek to create meaning and build connections, Jewish leaders must question longstanding values and basic assumptions about how we lead, manage, and relate to individuals and families within our communities. To remain relevant centers of Jewish life, we believe organizations and their leaders will need to embrace contemporary values such as openness/connections (vs. privacy/distance), collaboration (vs. competition), and subjectivity (vs. objectivity). They must also recognize that their job is not simply to maintain institutions, but instead to lead and strengthen communities with shared mission and purpose. This will require reinterpreting the models we have inherited from the past, building new professional skills, and experimenting with new approaches. We invite rabbis to see our current moment in time as a phenomenal opportunity for regeneration and empowerment of our communities.

Unlike the spiritual leaders of many other faiths, rabbis are not considered to have special intermediary powers between God and the people, but rather to be communal leaders working among the people with divine lessons and wisdom. What does it mean to lead a community, and what skills does one need to do so effectively today? Community leadership does not stem from a graduate degree, a job title, or assigned responsibility. Leadership is not about power or authority alone; it requires vision, goal setting, collaboration, and the ability to inspire and guide a group of people toward shared goals and purpose. What exactly those goals and purpose are may vary from one community to another, across denominations, or based on the organizational setting in which one works. But a common thread across all of these is the ability to create connection, cohesion, and momentum among a group of people. This is neither pushing from behind nor pulling from the front, but rather organizing from within.

We believe that rabbis must possess a core skillset and perspective stemming from the emerging field of network organizing in order to be effective in connecting and inspiring Jewish community today and

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tomorrow. To be clear, the concepts we espouse in the pages that follow are not reserved for rabbis alone; in fact, all Jewish professionals and lay leaders could benefit from training in network organizing. However, rabbis in particular can play a transformative role to usher in a new paradigm for engaging with and strengthening community.

## What Is “Community”?

What is *community* in its deepest sense? In the Jewish “community” we use this term to refer to nearly everything: the people I have Shabbat dinner with, the members of my synagogue, the Jews in my locality, all Jews in my country, Jews around the world, Jews throughout time.... We have lost the depth of meaning and intention of the word *community*. If rabbis are tasked with building and enriching Jewish community, the first thing we need is a deep and nuanced sense of what we mean by community.

Martin Buber sharpens our understanding of *community* by distinguishing it from *collectivity*: “Collectivity is not a binding, but a bundling together; individuals packed together, armed and equipped in common, with only as much life from man to man as will inflame the marching step... Community... is the being no longer side by side but *with* one another of a multitude of persons.... [While] collectivity is based on an organized atrophy of personal existence, community [is based] on its increase and confirmation in life lived toward one another” (Buber, *Between Man and Man*, Psychology Press, 2002, pp. 31–32). As Buber (2002) also writes, “The purpose of community is community.”

What community means and what it looks like may vary in different settings—from a rural town to an urban center, from a university Hillel to a service learning experience. Regardless of the setting, there is evidence that when a community is defined and maintained by leaders together with their stakeholders, it is more likely to thrive and have relevance for all involved. Clarifying shared goals builds commitment to one another, investment in the community, and collaborative will.

Measurements and language are critical here. If, for example, we mistake “members” for “community,” we have created an artificial barrier between those who choose to subscribe/affiliate and those who don’t. Often our sense of what constitutes a community is bounded by institutional lines or physical boundaries. In synagogues, we have dues-paying members. In cities, we draw lines to demarcate jurisdictions. These kinds of definitions may be useful for certain purposes, but they are not useful tools for building true community.

By looking beyond a narrow definition of community to one that is more expansive, rabbinic leaders can begin to kindle more vibrant communities that provide deeper connection and meaning for a wider group than a core of loyal individuals. The process of embodying this more expansive understanding of community means that rabbinic leaders (and others) will likely have to let go of constructs that have been normative in the field—language, programs, traditional notions of “affiliation,” etc.—in order to redefine a vision of community for the populations we seek to engage. In its place, we must come to appreciate the value of peer-to-peer social connections—trust, support, collaboration—as the fundamental building blocks of community, and, perhaps even more so, the leader’s role in weaving these connections into a purposeful and nourishing network.

We recognize that some of the most effective, respected, and well-loved rabbis are those who are already actively engaged in building community, and they may have entered the rabbinate with experience, skills, or good instincts that they have leveraged in their work. To impact the field as a whole, rabbinic training can follow the lead of these *dugma'ot* (models). Leading a networked community requires great intentionality, and thus rabbinic education must provide theories and tools for cultivating live social networks. Network organizing offers new horizons for rabbis to embrace the facilitative role of building community.

### **Building and Organizing Networks: The Connective Tissue of a Community**

What are networks all about? A network is an intricate web of relationships—strong and weak, old and new. Those relationships function as the connective tissue of a community, enabling information, ideas, and even emotions to spread throughout the network. A well-cultivated network becomes a marketplace for exchange, in which the practice of reciprocity allows *everyone* to give and take from the network as their circumstances allow. This democratization of community reduces some of the artificial divisions that exist between leaders and the “crowd,” yet leaders must be keenly prepared to step in and facilitate both exchange and emergent collaboration, as we detail below.

Fundamentally, networks are about people, not institutions. As we shift from an institutional approach to a network approach, we become less concerned with form (*how* we convene), and more concerned with function (*why* we convene). Since the *why* is more important than the *how*, networks often have more flexible, *ad hoc* structures—for example, instead of standing committees, networks will favor shorter-term project teams. A networked way of thinking helps leaders renew their focus on the people they serve, and their responsibilities to those people, while reducing the need to be responsible for maintaining a rigid institutional framework and familiar behaviors (“this is the way we’ve always done it...”). Many of those we seek to engage today (and especially tomorrow) are less concerned with preserving institutions for the institution’s sake, and more interested in finding the people, structures, and opportunities that fit their needs and interests.

#### *Building Networks*

Building networks is about weaving relationships, trust, and shared purpose among individuals, groups, ideas, goods, and services so that the *potential for exchange* is augmented. Network building could be seen as a more intentional form of community building, since “default” community building practices often assume that the mere act of bringing people together will form relationships. Instead, network building works from the assumption that people need support and scaffolding to build trusting and productive relationships with each other.

When we think of intentionally building relationships, an example that immediately comes to mind is the “icebreaker”—a dedicated warm-up activity to connect people before the “real” program of an event or meeting formally begins. Network building turns this practice on its head: What if we didn’t just spend ten minutes on an icebreaker but designed a whole convening around coming together to connect, share, and co-create? Network building is based on the premise that connection, trust, authenticity, and shared purpose must already exist among people before they can act and create together.

Some rabbis and lay leaders in synagogue settings have already experimented with intentional network building by holding community conversations or parlor meetings. For example, at Congregation Beth Israel in Charlottesville, Virginia, an intentional “interfaith” event included a luncheon with various table topics (December celebrations with grandparents, death and burial, to convert or not to convert) to help people with shared interests find each other and have focused and meaningful conversations. Because they connected so deeply on issues that were of great personal importance, the groups stayed long after the scheduled end of the event and continued to convene on their own, evolving their own practice and influencing the culture and programming of the synagogue.

A common form of institutional community building is a retreat, which is typically convened to take business off-site, away from the distractions of the office. Similarly, community conversations or parlor meetings are often hosted off-site, but more often in the comfort and intimacy of a community member’s home, with a focus on people rather than business. They use storytelling as the primary tool for convening—a method for building trust and understanding, without an underlying agenda beyond the weaving of networks. We need not always frame our coming together to solve a problem or to do business, and yet these “pure” venues often lead to some spontaneous benefit or action for the community.

Recently, Temple Beth Abraham in Tarrytown, New York has been convening these conversations in homes. Through the process, TBA is learning more about their community members and gradually shifting the culture of the community to reflect their vision—one in which the power of generosity uplifts, educates, nurtures, and cares for congregants. By asking questions such as “What’s one of your earliest formative Jewish memories?” and “What’s an example of when Judaism felt really great?”, they have invited congregants to open up, share their stories, and connect to one another and to the community as a whole. By listening, leaders are able to hear what’s important to their members, what connects people to each other, and where they can more intentionally work to facilitate connections and exchange.

### *Organizing Networks*

Organizing networks requires that leaders take an active role to *foster exchange* and unleash the kinetic energy of all those woven together, in pursuit of shared goals. As we illustrate above, spontaneous benefit can emerge from communal networks, but we can give it a boost by serving as a broker of exchange and providing resources for emerging ideas and collaboration.

This is very different from what often happens in our communities. A common scenario involves leaders recognizing a problem, deciding what is best for their community among a small group of insiders (senior staff and/or board members), and then justifying their decision to the community. Sometimes we see an alternative scenario among leaders who are more community-minded, who understand the imperative to find solutions with community “input.” These leaders will call a community together to develop recommendations, and then they work to implement those ideas themselves. Occasionally, they will fail to follow through due to time constraints, thus losing the community’s trust.

Both of these scenarios illustrate leaders “over-functioning”—Jewish professionals and boards doing tasks

for their target audiences when those individuals might be better served in more active roles, getting their hands dirty along with paid staff and elected leaders. Not only does this way of working add to the workload, but it also disempowers those in the community. To engender *empowerment and shared ownership*, leaders need to support community members to bring their ideas for community betterment to fruition themselves, all the while gaining self-confidence, feeling a sense of purpose, learning from mistakes, and deepening their commitment to the community. To effectively organize empowering networks, leaders must provide time and resources to empower community members' implementation of new ideas.

Imagine the rabbi of a JCC who is frustrated with people coming to her, complaining about the lack of diverse perspectives in JCC Israel programming, or about the failure of a JCC Shabbat experience to be welcoming enough to x constituents. What can *she* do to remedy these situations? She's the rabbi, after all! Some personalities will let complaints like this roll off their backs, but most invested leaders take complaints to heart and feel responsible for fixing things that aren't working. The burden this places on rabbis is overwhelming alongside their day-to-day responsibilities. Being equipped with network organizing strategies and tools for empowering community members can help rabbis turn complaints into opportunities for empowerment, and reduce their responsibility for fixing everything and pleasing everyone—nearly impossible tasks.

As Allison Fine (past president of Temple Beth Abraham in Tarrytown, New York and co-author of *The Networked Nonprofit*) has elucidated in her blogpost "Matter-ness as Organizing Principle" ([allisonfine.com](http://allisonfine.com), November 2013), complaints frequently stem from people feeling that they *don't matter* to the community. They not only want their voices to be heard, but they also want to be asked questions and engaged in solutions. If, as leaders, we work to help everyone feel that they matter by weaving them into the communal network, perhaps we would even see the number of complaints significantly decrease as more people are empowered to shape the community themselves. Rabbis can be on the front lines supporting people to reimagine themselves as actors on the Jewish stage rather than passive audience members in the pews and on the sidelines.

Stepping back, we should clarify that there is a greater purpose to building and organizing networks beyond the benefits to the immediate individuals and communities involved. In the secular network organizing field, there has been tremendous experimentation in the last decade to apply these ideas in community-based settings in places as diverse as Lawrence, MA; Silver Spring, MD; Louisville, KY; and Cleveland, OH. These pioneering organizations are primarily interested in solving ongoing social problems that have thus far confounded social policy: how to bring low-income communities out of isolation and thereby break cycles of poverty; how to leverage socioeconomic and racial diversity so that communities better serve the needs of people across the spectrum; how to unleash ideas, creativity, and collaboration at the grassroots for collective action and change.

Similarly, rabbinic leadership inspired by network organizing principles can address deep structural challenges in Jewish life. As we have said, network organizing has the potential to rekindle commitment among those who are choosing not to identify with classic Jewish institutions, thus working against today's strong tides of disaffiliation with synagogues and other established organizations. Network organizing is a major tool for breaking through the all-too-frequent political stalemates of governing boards by building

and channeling grassroots energy in positive, productive directions. It's a framework for guiding people who are starting new organizations to think about people and purpose first. And it also prompts entrepreneurs to find extra-institutional ways of meeting Jewish missions: Do we have to start an organization every time we want to make something happen? Or can we move and flow as networks do, creating structures we need today with the understanding that we may evolve or even disband them tomorrow, as needs and interests shift? A network organizing approach helps leaders be more flexible, adaptable, creative, collaborative, enabling, and purpose-driven—all attributes that the Jewish communal world craves in order to reinvent itself in this century.

### **Rabbinic Leadership in the Network Organizing Paradigm: Four Essential Skills**

Effective network leadership will require rabbis to develop new skills and learn to work in new ways. For those already working in established organizations and communities, this may involve helping others to pivot their role in the community as well, so that existing practices and cultural norms can adapt. Those in newer settings or those starting new ventures will have an opportunity to put network skills into action from the beginning. While learning to work in new ways may seem daunting, in fact network organizing can offer a huge relief as leaders empower others to do the lifting.

As rabbis study network leadership, each individual (as well as the profession as a whole) can clarify where they can continue to make an important difference as experts on Jewish thought and practice, and where they can work as network organizers, stepping back to let others take the lead—a form of *tzimtzum*, a contraction of the self for the betterment of the whole. In the process, they will illuminate roles and tasks that may be best assumed by others for the health of the network, and for the sanity and long-term well-being of the rabbi!

The following are four key areas we believe rabbis can be trained in to build and strengthen their networks:

#### **1. Awareness of Power**

Our institutions rightfully give great deference to rabbis who have had years of training and possess a deep grasp of text and tradition. The act of giving deference involves granting rabbis positional power, which allows them to positively impact many aspects of community life, whether they serve as a traditional *mara d'atra* (the local authority in Jewish law), provide pastoral care, or set out a moral framework for our lives through teaching or advocacy.

Challenges arise when that power—which can be used so positively—unwittingly downplays the power and strengths of others, setting up a dynamic in which the rabbi's expertise places him or her on a different plane than the rest of the community. This is antithetical to a networked approach. The subtler aspects of rabbinic power are bound up in the image of the rabbi as a leader imbued with confidence and wisdom from his/her training. Even if it is not completely obvious, rabbinic power can enter into uncomfortable territory when teaching becomes preaching rather than inquiring, or when the way a rabbi feels about a communal issue (unknowingly) crowds out room for other perspectives or makes people feel marginalized.

In 2007, shortly after the Conservative movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards approved its historic opinions on homosexuality, Rabbi Ethan Seidel of Tifereth Israel Congregation in Washington, DC, was in a difficult spot. His socially-progressive, egalitarian community had already decided where it stood on the matter, but he was not quick to embrace the more lenient responsa, which had many implications for Conservative synagogues. The congregation was highly welcoming and inclusive of LGBT families, and yet his personal preferences were not aligned with communal values. He remembers it as a time of great pain, and many of his members were publicly angry with him.

To work through the tension, Rabbi Seidel led a multi-session discussion of the responsa to understand not only what was written but also how the community felt about the issues. After taking part in many emotional and intense discussions, he knew that he needed to follow his community's lead to preserve longstanding relationships he had with LGBT congregants and allies, as well as a sense of unity in the congregation. He approved changes like offering a *mi shebeirach* to a gay or lesbian couple coming to the Torah for an *aufruf*, making gay and lesbian couples eligible to pay dues as a "family" unit, and allowing the synagogue's sanctuary to be used for commitment ceremonies—as long as other clergy performed them. Some community members questioned how he could allow ceremonies and yet not perform them himself; to them, his actions felt inauthentic. After years of living in the new reality with his congregation, Rabbi Seidel eventually decided to set aside his personal prohibition and officiated his first same-sex wedding in the synagogue's sanctuary. Today, when reflecting on his journey, he remarks that the pain was so deep, and yet today he doesn't think twice about the matter—it has become a new normal for him and has made him a more resonant leader because of the evolution of his own thought and practice.

From this story, we see how a networked style of communal leadership requires that rabbis are aware of their power and how they wield it, as well as toward what end. It is very common that people with power tend to downplay the scope and impact of their power, believing that the distance between us is much narrower than others perceive. Today's cutting-edge trainings of top executives in the corporate world often include tools for building leaders' emotional intelligence, like a 360-degree feedback process, which builds a deep awareness of self based on real data from colleagues, supervisors, family members, and community members. These types of tools are critical for those in positions of power who are often the least likely to receive accurate feedback from their coworkers and constituents. Yet to successfully develop and lead in a networked environment, transparency and honesty are paramount. The whole system becomes healthier, and the community is able to mature, when leaders are not sheltered from honest feedback and are newly aware of their self-positioning in the network.

## **2. Community Empowerment**

Hierarchy is inevitable in organized systems, and it is more pronounced in systems with professionalized roles, like that of the rabbi. With power awareness comes the ability to transcend the limitations of hierarchy. What does this look like? In broad terms, rabbis would embrace their power and use it in ways that build others up, which requires that they step back to make space for others to contribute.

The simplest example might be sharing the responsibility to teach classes or to speak from the pulpit. Through a network organizing lens, rabbis would not only ask others to teach or speak (which often elicits

a polite decline) but would *coach* them to do so in a way that frames their arguments and brings out confidence in their ideas, in public speaking, in engaging with supporting texts—which are all skills that many lay people don't believe they have because many have never been supported to engage this deeply.

Rabbi Paul Kipnes at Congregation Or Ami in Calabasas, California, used the High Holidays as an opportunity to work in new ways. As he wrote on the RJ.org blog (October, 2013), “It was time again to explore *Unetaneh Tokef*, the haunting prayer most remembered for its opening lines: ‘On Rosh HaShanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is Sealed... Who shall live and who shall die.’ I read this text as a cosmic wake up call: God reminds us that “stuff” happens. *Unetaneh Tokef* forces us to face this reality and to decide: How are *you* going to deal with it?” Rabbi Kipnes invited the community into conversation by posting on social media, “What did you learn from going through hardship or challenge?” Responses poured in from all around the congregation and around the country. “The question struck a few heart strings as people posted publicly and some privately about the *tsuris* (problems) in their lives. Face-to-face conversations with other community members elicited many significant lessons learned. From these responses, as well as those from people I spoke with over the course of a few months, three categories of hardship rose up as being particularly challenging: financial ruin, turmoil from dealing with children with special needs, and horrible medical diagnoses.”

Following from this experience, Rabbi Kipnes invited three congregants to share their stories in place of his usual frontal sermon. While these congregants had emotional and personal stories, they may not have been skilled in text study, and not all had ideas ready for presentation. Rabbi Kipnes worked with his congregants to build a connection to the themes of the holidays, and to polish their stories. At the end of the day, he may have spent just as much time working with his congregants as he would spend writing his own sermon. But instead of controlling the message on the *bima*, he positively influenced the transmission of diverse messages that came from congregants' real experiences. By taking the time to cultivate others, he enabled his congregants, building their confidence and capacity to contribute. Perhaps even more importantly, his actions signaled to community members that there is an opportunity and an open invitation to be an active and valued participant in the synagogue community. And, in the end, he brought the theoretical lessons of the liturgy to life for the whole community.

Working with others and in groups can be challenging. Sometimes it seems like things would get done faster (or better) if we just did it ourselves. This approach, however, reinforces a top-down leadership approach and disempowers the network. As rabbis work to lead communities instead of institutions, the *process* of working together is valuable, not only the *product* that is created. When shifting the culture to a network-based model, attentiveness to the process translates to rewriting patterns of engagement and building the relationships that will serve our communities over the long term.

Acting with power awareness and transcending hierarchy means that rabbis and other leaders will typically be working from *behind and through* the community, rather than from the front. Rabbis will have to learn to adjust to periodic failures or imperfect messages. But communal empowerment cannot emerge from the “command and control” model we are used to. Empowering others to share ownership of the community unleashes creativity and brings a new layer of meaning to people's lives as they become more active learners and contributors, rather than passive recipients of expertly-held lessons and wisdom. In this way, rabbis shift from being merely *teachers* to becoming *mentors and coaches* for Jewish communal

leadership. As a corollary, “volunteers” evolve from “donating” time to assuming communal responsibilities as empowered members of a network.

### 3. Empathy

A deep and genuine understanding of others is the glue which binds individuals to one another. Developing empathy and social awareness as core skills of one’s rabbinate helps to activate the relationships and positive emotions that are necessary for stewarding a strong, sustainable, and vibrant network.

Being empathetic often means that we must open up to others about who we truly are—our joys and struggles, our strengths and flaws—so as to invite others to be similarly open and willing to share. We become more vulnerable when we develop deeper relationships grounded in empathy. Vulnerability can feel uncomfortable when we are used to having greater professional distance, but it may in fact be an essential attribute to building a strong and committed community. Indeed, in the past, vulnerability was a leadership weakness, and the default was to keep everything private unless there was a reason to be public. Now the winds have shifted to just the opposite. Open leaders in networked environments report that reducing these artificial boundaries and connecting deeply on a human level has far more advantages than disadvantages when building community, as these leaders are better able to provide support, strengthen ties, and foster meaning-making.

A perhaps radical example of empathy and vulnerability in action is the story of Rabbi Phyllis Sommer of Am Shalom in Glencoe, Illinois. By blogging about her son’s battle with cancer, she made it easier for her community to support her family, and to come together to support each other in dealing with tragic and unexpected circumstances. Moreover, a group of rabbis who learned of her son’s story raised over \$600,000 for childhood cancer research, garnering donations from a network of people who followed Rabbi Sommer’s story from around the world. In this case, the rabbi’s openness triggered empathetic responses which offered an opportunity for others’ participation, not only in the family’s plight but in the cause at large.

Empathy is already a focus of rabbinic training in pastoral care, but we believe that empathy is an essential skill and practice that needs to be woven throughout one’s rabbinate. Some seminaries provide modules in Clinical Pastoral Education that teach empathetic listening, and that use techniques like role play or “verbatim,” in which students write up conversations they have in pastoral settings and evaluate how and why they responded to congregants or patients in certain ways. While these tools provide a solid foundation for empathy, there is a need to broaden the study and practice of empathy beyond the pastoral counseling relationship so that rabbis can *build empathy into their systems*, designing community engagement and allocating their time and energy to support the network’s strength and growth.

When communal systems are empathetic, the people within them take an active interest in each other’s concerns. They are more able to create and maintain trusting relationships, suspend judgment, give others the benefit of the doubt, refrain from politicking and instigating conflict, and work collaboratively.

At Greenburgh Hebrew Center in Dobbs Ferry, New York, leaders realized the value of social connections

when results came in from an in-depth community survey. The data showed that when people felt they had strong social connections, their satisfaction with other areas of synagogue life were also higher, from religious school to High Holidays services. Learning from this, the congregation rededicated itself to “being a family for one another.” They changed their vision and values to reflect the focus on “being there for each other.” They put a special emphasis on *being a caring community*, not just having a caring committee. Doing so meant increasing empathy, which led to customizing their responses for bereavement, illness, and births, as each situation called for a different response. They developed procedures, liaisons, and personalization for every situation, including asking each person what would be most helpful. As a result, many more people are stepping forward to take on caring roles in the community, and targeted donations to their caring work have skyrocketed. A deep commitment to empathy and one another has become the identity and narrative of the congregation.

How can rabbis build empathy into their institutions, as at Greenburgh Hebrew Center? For one, rabbinic leaders can grow the number of empathetic liaisons in their community. Traditionally, the rabbi is a prime “holder” of relationships and the sole provider of pastoral counseling. While we are not advocating that others should become pastoral counselors, we do believe that a networked community thrives when many people have deeper, trusting relationships that encourage them to be open with each other when times are tough. Rabbis can intentionally pass along their skills in this area by training others in providing support and positive connections during joyful and challenging life cycle moments, or during illness. Having a cadre of people who are looking after each other—taking *gemilut chasadim* (acts of loving kindness) to a new level—means that the rabbi must work among the people to advance their collective comfort and skill in being empathetic.

By modeling real, emotional investment in each other, every recipient wants to pay it forward, and this is what helps to build a culture of trust and positivity in which people are leaning in toward each other and advancing the betterment of the collective.

#### **4. Facilitation**

There are three facilitative roles for effective leaders of a networked community. First, network leaders model and help people become aware of the value of relationships, supporting them in the art and practice of building trusting relationships and engaging in exchange. Network building matriarch June Holley has dubbed this role the “network weaver,” which is a facilitative role working between and among people to weave connections that release the potential energy of the network.

Second, to organize a networked community, leaders must also have some capacity in facilitating and coaching individual skill-building and small-group collaboration—moving beyond basic network weaving to network capacity-building. Other than working directly with the people of the network, this may also include concerted efforts to mature systems that build the network’s capacity, such as communications, physical space for collaboration, or resources to support individuals as they take on new roles.

Zooming out to the big picture, the third facilitative role of leaders is to guide a networked community in the creation and ownership of a shared vision of community—articulating the community’s strength and potential, and what it wants to become and achieve. Facilitating the emergence and implementation of a

shared vision is transformative for a community, and it is a pivotal moment of shifting from leading an institution to leading a community. Skilled network facilitators can realize a communal vision by catalyzing small action groups, developing and maintaining internal systems for communication, and enabling trust, momentum, and empowerment.

Rabbis may not play all three of these facilitative roles, as they can share these responsibilities with other people in their communal networks. For example, establishing communication systems may be the role of a communications director or communications committee. However, utilizing the tools and developing a culture of communication within the network may mean that rabbis actively use a social media platform or participate more transparently online through blogging.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum, founder of the Kavana Cooperative in Seattle, Washington, places a strong emphasis on facilitation as a core attribute of her rabbinic leadership. As she writes in the Winter/Spring 2011 *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* (pg. 106-107), “Many of Kavana’s most successful programs have community building as a core goal and use some degree of social engineering as a means to this end.” Rabbi Nussbaum admits that this is a “complex” and “labor-intensive” process, but essential for developing the community she envisions. “I have been known to cancel events from time to time, not only because of low numbers but also because the particular combination of individuals who have registered may not gel properly as a group....This is not a job I was trained to do in rabbinical school, but I have consciously made this social engineering a core part of what I do. I believe that this focus on facilitating relationships has contributed to people feeling deeply invested in this community and believing that it has great value in their day-to-day lives.”

In an age when information and expertise is easier than ever to access, rabbis can help people make meaning of that information and of their personal experiences. Rabbis have long been facilitators of connection to Jewish history and text, as well as escorts and guides of our life transitions as we marry, become parents, or grieve for loved ones. Network facilitation is not so far afield from this traditional role, yet takes it a step further by weaving and organizing people together so that *the individual quest for purpose and understanding of life’s mysteries is not undertaken in isolation from others*. Moreover, network facilitation gives rabbis permission to creatively and deeply support people who may be having experiences that either fall outside the bounds of the traditional life cycle or that are taboo—for example, those who are grappling with being single, infertility, or caring for aging parents and grandparents.

## **Conclusion**

Taken altogether, the framework of network organizing, and specifically these four skills—awareness of power, community empowerment, empathy, and facilitation—can deepen the rabbi’s role as a spiritual guide for community. We believe that spirituality is bound up in feeling purposeful and connected lives. We may, in fact, be more able to commune with the Divine, to recognize moments of awe and wonder, and to own our Jewish identities and destinies when our life journeys are intricately woven with others’ journeys. The going is easier and the safety net is stronger when we are in relationship. The joys are even more potently joyful when we share them with others. The excitement and personal growth that come from being a part of a religious, spiritual, or cultural community are even more palpable when we actively engage in that community, and shape it, with others.

We are all learning how the world is changing, and we are beginning to understand what may be necessary to adapt to new demographics, cultural values, and ways of organizing ourselves. Network theory and practice both reflect and refract contemporary values, inviting rabbis to use their social influence and mastery of Jewish content to empower others in becoming proactive co-creators of meaningful and purposeful Jewish community.

The ideas we have presented are not necessarily new. In fact, they may point to more traditional models of community that promoted greater connection and responsibility for one another. It does, in fact, take a village to build deep and meaningful community. Rabbis cannot—and should not—do this alone. With a network organizing model, we are able to see more clearly where and how rabbis can lead their communities to achieve their potential. In the words of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook: *Hayashan yitchadesh, v'hechadash yitkadesh*—the old will be renewed, and the new will be sanctified.