

# **AMITIM – How Former American Federation CEOs are Supporting Nonprofits in Israel Post October 7**

By Michael Weil

Amitim is an innovative program that mobilizes engages former Jewish Federation CEOs to strengthen Israel and increase the professional capacity of institutions there. Establishing Amitim began in early 2023 and the intention was to launch the program in the Fall. Then October 7 happened with the horrific tragedy of murder, rape, kidnapping and devastation. While the intelligence and military forces were taken by surprise and struggled to respond, and existing safety net mechanisms mostly collapsed, grass roots organizations and civil society immediately mobilized in a remarkable way with a surge of volunteering initiatives and with an inspiring show of unity across Israel and Diaspora communities. The new realities of devastated kibbutzim and the nonprofit sector needing to readjust and respond created the impetus to launch Amitim earlier than planned and to pivot to meet the new urgent needs.

The idea of Amitim is predicated on the valuable and under-utilized resource of talent among former Federation CEOs. They possess unique skills and vast experience that could be tapped for the better good of the Jewish People in general and Israel in particular. They are an impressive group of highly capable managers, amazing fundraisers and adept at navigating the complex and delicate internal and external landscapes that Federations operate in and retain a passion and commitment to Israel. Yet as retirees, many are searching for ways to continue to contribute to the American Jewish community and support Israel.

Amitim created an opportunity to re-engage many former CEOs to support the amazing innovative work that the third (nonprofit) sector is doing in Israel. Israeli nonprofits have some shortcomings, in particular in areas of governance, financial management, planning for the future and fundraising. Indeed, many have rather a narrow myopic view of their own organizational environment, are heavily reliant on government funding, tend to neutralize their own boards and do not understand the complexities of fundraising overseas.

Project Amitim<sup>1</sup> was born as a mechanism to link the resources of former Federation CEOs to the needs of the leadership of nonprofits in Israel by acting as mentors to them.

To establish Amitim, partnerships were developed in Israel with Project Ment-Or (part of the Ogen Financial Group), Shatil (subsidiary of the New Israel Fund), and the Israeli Civic Leadership Association to assist in recruiting nonprofits in Israel and provide expertise as needed. In parallel, the platform to recruit former Federation CEOs already existed thanks to the initiative of Mark Freedman (former CEO at the San Antonio, Nashville and Broward County Federations) who initiated a forum of Former Intermediate Federation Executives three years ago that meets frequently to discuss matters relating to American Jewry and Israel.

---

<sup>1</sup> “Amitim” is Hebrew for “colleagues” and the name is also closely related to the term “Amutah” which is the official Hebrew name for nonprofits in Israel. Indeed, the name “Amitim” expresses the very essence of this initiative; namely to engage former colleagues who have served as Federation CEOs to support Israel and nonprofits there.

Through this forum, 13 former Federation CEOs were recruited to engage in Amitim. With the war acting as a catalyst, the program was both expanded and adjusted to meet the needs of Israel post October 7 and now operates in two distinct avenues.

The first avenue is to support some of the ravaged kibbutzim in the Western Negev post October 7. Five former Federation CEOs volunteered to assist the kibbutzim to raise funds in North America. The intent was to compliment efforts of the mainstream funders such as the Government of Israel, JFNA, JNF, JAFI and IFCJ, and to focus on modest but urgent unmet needs. We were especially directing efforts on behalf of the smaller and lesser known kibbutzim and ones that have had less human tragedy and physical destruction but still suffered from personal and communal trauma. Using their network of funders and philanthropists, our former Federation CEOs are helping to identify potential sources for the kibbutzim and raising awareness in North America.

Dafna Ben Ami of Kibbutz Nirim expresses their appreciation:

*“Beyond his remarkable fundraising efforts, Drew has truly become a friend and integral participant in the process of rebuilding our community. His unwavering support, genuine concern, and attentiveness to our evolving needs have made a significant impact.*

*We extend our heartfelt thanks to the "Amitim" for their pivotal role in fostering this essential partnership. We believe this collaboration will be a cornerstone for our community for years to come.”*

The second avenue is close to the original intent and eight former CEOs have been matched with eight significant nonprofits in Israel to assist the leadership of the nonprofits to enable them to function more effectively, especially those impacted by or working towards the war effort. Indeed, the war generated new needs in social services, increased existing ones, while at the same time public funding has been cut and many critical staff have been mobilized.

An RFP process was carried out in December 2023 and amazingly over a hundred Israeli nonprofits leaders expressed their interest in joining the project reflecting the consequences of an Israeli society fractured by an extensive war. For the first pilot phase, eight pairs were chosen and connected with American former Federation CEO volunteers after matching needs and skills.

The nonprofits chosen to be part of this program are:

**YAHIEL** --- Service & social action for young people from overseas; **DREAM DOCTORS** --- Medical clowns; **TAHEL** --- Crisis Center for Religious Women; **KAV LE'OVED** --- Employees hotline; **ALUMA** --- Giving teens and young adults opportunities for meaningful service, higher education, and employment; **PITCHON LEV** --- Breaking the cycle of poverty; **HACHAZER HANASHIT** – The Women’s Courtyard --- Support for girls and young women who deal with distress and risk; **BEIT HAGALGALIM** – House of Wheels --- Providing enrichment activities for children and young adults with disabilities.

A series of orientation workshops were held both in Israel and the USA in January to prepare participants and to allow them to understand the differences of their respective organizational environments.

Following guided introductory sessions, the CEO pairs began meeting on a regular basis and are working together on specific issues such as strengthening governance, strategic planning, change management, fundraising and networking in North America, all on the basis of an agenda suggested by the Israeli partner.

Most of the pairs of CEOs are coming to the end of the initial six months milestone of mentoring. The feedback has been extremely positive and some of the nonprofits wish to continue. This is especially rewarding as Israelis on the whole are not known for their vulnerability or their willingness to ask for assistance. But the total discretion that Amitim provides and the unique skills that former Federation CEOs are able to share has created an environment of openness, trust and respect.

Ohad Amar, the new CEO of Kav Le Oved describes his experience at the time of extreme stress:

*“As the new CEO of an Israeli organization amid a war with its myriad challenges, I encountered the Amitim project. This mentoring program equipped me with invaluable tools and perspectives that enabled me to navigate the complexities of that turbulent period.”*

Even a seasoned CEO like Tsour Shriqui, CEO, the Dream Doctors Project felt that he had learnt a lot:

*“I was fortunate to join the Amitim Program and to have Paul as my mentor. Despite having over ten years of experience in the nonprofit world, I have learned so much in a short period of time. What amazes me is that two Jewish individuals, located in different parts of the world but sharing the same DNA, can come together to do good for Israel.”*

An important contribution of Amitim has been to bring some of the benefits of American culture of nonprofits to Israel as Aviv Spiegelman of the House of Wheels explained:

*“Meetings with an experienced professional in management using American methods create a very effective work practice in Israel.”*

Some of the impact has been very real and meaningful. One CEO was helped to think strategically and long term about her organisation and subsequently organised a workshop to create a ten-year plan. Another is embarking on a capital project guided by his American mentor. In many cases, the American former CEOs have helped improve governance and connections between the board and the professional leadership. Indeed, one of the attributes of the Amitim program is its flexibility, ability to be nimble and respond quickly to changing circumstances and new needs.

Being in a mentoring relationship has also been very meaningful for the American mentors who feel that they are making a real contribution to civil society in Israel. Sandi Goldstein, former Exec at the Long Beach Federation expresses this so well:

*“Pitchon-Lev is a most impressive Israeli NGO where I am privileged to serve as their pro bono, strategic advisor. They are respectful of my time and their actions reflect that they can integrate and benefit from the expertise I provide. I am most fortunate as an American Jewish communal professional to add value to such a relevant Israeli organization that is devoted to breaking the cycle of poverty in Israel. “*

The importance of openness and trust is stressed by Neil Berro, former exec at the Canton and New Haven Jewish Federations:

*“What impresses me most about the partnership process is the apparent effort taken to explore the backgrounds and strengths of Israeli and American partners to seek good matches. Their CEO presented a vision which engaged my approach. The key is openness based on trust. “*

In the coming months, Amitim will be conducting a formal evaluation of the pilot phase and each set of relationships. This will be followed by further rounds of recruitment of nonprofits in Israel who feel the need for mentoring, together with more cohorts of former Federations CEOs to contribute to Israel.

The plan is to continue to expand the model and engage other groups of seasoned Jewish communal executives in North America and elsewhere to provide their skills and experience to strengthen Israel.

In summary, Amitim represents a unique way of connecting American Jews to Israel and making contributions to both communities, as respective CEOs meet together as colleagues and equals, learning and supporting each other.

The pilot phase of Amitim has been generously supported by the Thom and Lisa Mandel Family Foundation and the Berelowitch Family Foundation.

***If you would like to learn more about Amitim and be involved, please contact the author and founder of Amitim at [michaelweil66@gmail.com](mailto:michaelweil66@gmail.com)***

=====

Michael Weil is a British born economist and strategic planning consultant based in Jerusalem and Arizona. Previously, he was the Executive Director of the Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans and led the recovery of the community after hurricane Katrina.

Earlier, he was a fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute, held senior positions at World ORT and the Israel Prime Minister’s Office as well as heading an international consulting practice for two decades.

He is active on boards in Israel and USA. Loves to paint, hike, opera and dry jokes.