

New initiative, Amitim, looks to bring former federation CEOs' experience to Israeli nonprofits

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JOLLY GOOD FELLOWS

Through the program, Israeli NGO leaders are matched with former Jewish communal executives for guidance and an opportunity to 'vent'



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Illustrative.

By
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Once a week at the end of a long and challenging work day, the executive director of Kav LaOved/Workers Hotline, Ohad Amar, can finally exhale. After putting his young daughter to bed, he switches on the computer in Jaffa, Israel, and for one hour, he can talk freely about his concerns and doubts as he tries to safely guide his staff through a treacherous period working in a human rights organization helping vulnerable workers during a time of war in Israel.

On the other side of the computer screen, just starting his day with his morning coffee in Florida, is philanthropist and mentor Elliot Gershenson, who spent 32 years serving the U.S. Jewish community at Jewish federations and synagogues before going on to be president and CEO of Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston and who is now CEO of his own consulting company.

Even though their worlds and work milieu are vastly different in many ways, the weekly conversations offer him perspective and tools to navigate organizational challenges, said Amar, who entered his first leadership role just under a year ago, leading a diverse staff reeling from the emotional toll of the war as well as as well as a 400% rise in requests for assistance from Palestinian and foreign workers.

“This slot in my week is the time that I allow myself to be weak or suspicious or to doubt myself or to ask myself hard questions, because Elliot creates this nonjudgmental environment and it helps me a lot: to vent, to reflect,” said Amar. “It helps me to get out of my skin. This is my business therapy... where I can say I’m not sure we’re going to a very good place in Israel. I’m not allowed to say it in my work because I have to lead this group of people. But to Elliot, I can say everything, anything.”

The two have been working together for the past six months as part of Amitim, a pro bono mentoring program, which links the resources of former Jewish federation CEOs to the needs of the leadership of nonprofits in Israel and *kibbutzim* affected by Oct. 7. The brainchild of Michael Weil, a British-born Israeli who now divides his time between Israel and the United States, Amitim (Hebrew for “fellows”) was conceived as an offshoot of the Forum of Former Intermediate Federation Executives initiative begun three years ago by Mark Freedman, the former top executive of the Jewish federations of Broward County, Fla.; Nashville, Tenn.; and San Antonio, Texas. The core funding for Amitim was provided by the Thom and Lisa Mandel Family Foundation.

“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,” Weil said. “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 has created an opportunity for former federation CEOs to reengage and support the work that the nonprofit sector is doing in Israel, he said. Though he described the work the Israeli nonprofits do as “amazing and innovative,” he said they also could use some assistance in restructuring in areas of governance, financial management, planning for the future and fundraising.

“Many have 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,” he added.

These are areas that he believes mentoring with former federation CEOs through Amitim can help nonprofits up their game in an increasingly difficult and demanding environment.

For Gershenson, who left the federation world 35 years ago, working as a mentor with Amar through the Amitim mentoring program has allowed him to reconnect with his love and concern for Israel.

“I’m not in sync with the politics in Israel right now, but that doesn’t change my unabating love and concern for the Israeli population and society,” Gershenson said, noting that part of their conversations crosses over into the more personal arena of the political and daily situation in Israel. “So it has helped me reconnect. I’ve told everybody that I’ve gained as much or more from Ohad than he has gained from me.”

The first cohort of the Amitim program was meant to launch last fall in cooperation with Israeli partners Project Ment-Or of the Ogen Financial Group, the New Israel Fund subsidiary Shatil and the Israeli Civic Leadership Association. But the devastation of the communities in the Western Negev, and the new realities faced by the nonprofit sector following the Oct. 7 attacks, spurred the early launch of Amitim and prompted a shift in focus to address the new urgent needs of both groups. Ultimately, the 12 former CEO volunteers were partnered with four *kibbutzim* — Nirim, Nir Yitzhak, Yad Mordechai and Magen, which were not as hard hit in the attacks but still suffered from personal and communal trauma — and six nonprofits, out of 120 who applied, that operate in Israel’s social welfare sector. (Two other nonprofits began the program but opted to put it on hold as they didn’t have the bandwidth to take on the project at this time, Weil said.)

In addition, Weil said that they are currently in discussions regarding a request that came before the invasion of Lebanon, to possibly begin a similar program in the north.

The mentoring is aimed at directors of established nonprofits that were heavily impacted by the war or are involved in the war effort as this is where the expertise of former federations executives could be of most help as their experience has been in working with fairly, large well-established organizations, explained Weil, who until recently served as executive director of the Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans and led the recovery of the community after Hurricane Katrina.

“We made it quite clear that we’re not providing a free fundraising service, even though there’s no better fundraiser than a federation CEO because that’s not what this idea was,” he said. “But rather, they would focus on whatever the organizational management governance needs of the Israeli nonprofit would be, and each one then had an introductory meeting where I and others would put them together, introduce them, discuss where they were, what their basic needs were, what they wanted to talk about, and then they were off on their own meeting on a regular basis.”

One of the things that most surprised him, as an Israeli who has served in the Israeli military and understands the military mentality, he said, was seeing the willingness of the Israeli CEOs to ask for guidance.

“To say: ‘I’d like to learn from you,’ is a very un-Israeli thing to say,” Weil said. “Yet in all of these six cases, they actually did say it and they developed a relationship of trust and understanding and discretion and mutual respect that is extraordinary.”

Through his conversations with Gershenson, Amar was able to restructure his board into a hybrid format that combined the seriousness and professionalism of the American model with the more informal style best suited for the Israeli temperament, and into one that would see itself as a true partner in the work of Kav LaOved, he said. He was able to run a successful crowdfunding campaign also using a hybrid style combining the American use of personal ambassadors for fundraising and the Israeli style relying more on social media. The first person he wanted to call after reaching his goal was Gershenson, Amar said. And, also with Gershenson’s encouragement he upped his request of NIS 10,000 (\$2,660) from a donor to NIS 100,000 (\$26,600) — and he received it.

“We mostly spent our time initially talking about what it’s like to be a CEO, because this is the first time he’s ever been a CEO, and he was particularly fearful of the philanthropic enterprise. So together, we began talking about philanthropy and how he can inspire people instead of just putting his hand in people’s pockets. And he has been very successful in that,” said Gershenson. “In the midst of a terrible economic situation in Israel, the war, and everything else, he’s had likely the most successful year that Kav LaOved has ever had. He’s beginning to develop a more strategic board, a more powerful board, a board that actually will help him a little.”

While the work with the nonprofits has been more successful than he originally imagined, the kibbutz segment of the program is likely to be phased out because the number of players in the field, and the lack of clear and organized rules of how to run things, makes things more difficult to navigate, Weil said.

They have however been successful in securing a number of grants and a collaboration with Federation CJA of Montreal for Kibbutz Nirim — whose leadership like that of the other kibbutzim had to urgently acquire a whole new tool kit of management skills. Of the current six nonprofits in the program, four have decided to continue for another six months, said Weil, and one — Kav LaOved — will switch to an actual contractual relationship at the beginning of 2025. Amitim is currently recruiting (michaelweil66@gmail.com) for the next Amitim cohort with 12 former federations CEOs already signed up.

Veteran CEO Tammy Halamish Eisenman, who heads the Israeli Aluma nonprofit, which works with disadvantaged teens and young adults, said she values taking part in mentorship programs, and what especially intrigued her about the Amitim program was the opportunity to work with someone who was similar to her, yet different.

“Working with federation directors, which is basically my world, but in another country, in the United States, seemed to me something that would be very fruitful and very instructive,” said Halamish Eisenman, whose organization helps post-high school youth from disadvantaged backgrounds acquire higher education and develop personal skills.

“I registered for the program before the war, and I was thinking about, ‘What are the areas I wanted to develop?’ I love learning, and I just saw this as a learning opportunity,” she said.

The first four months of the war hit her very hard, with all five of her adult children drafted into the reserves and one son and his family evacuated from the south. At the same time, the 250 employees of Aluma across the country and the 55,000 young people beneficiaries of Aluma were also all facing different levels of war-related stress, she said.

“At Aluma we try to present an optimistic picture of the future. A picture of the future that shows that the youth have options, that their future is in their hands if they work properly. And suddenly Aluma’s central thesis is moved and falling apart. How can we talk about a future in the uncertainty of the present? And so actually, that is where I was when I met Neil [Berro],” said Halamish Eisenman. “And it may sound a little strange, but the fact that I explained my situation to someone who is not from Israel helped me to give it a name, and explain the situation we are in. There was something about it that allowed me to see where I was because on a daily basis I would be ‘playing me’ in the middle of this thing.”

Despite the differences between Israelis and the American Jewish community, there have been many shared realities since the war and many people want to help, said Berro, who last served as CEO Jewish federations of New Haven, Conn., and Canton, Ohio, as part of a 25-year federation career.

“What better way to help than to reflect on one’s professional background,” said Berro. “We are reminded that we may sit in different parts of the boat, but we are in the same boat. Michael has worked profoundly to be the *gesher*, bridge, between the Israeli and the American perspective. I can only say that he has been a real mega mensch in this process and I would say Tammy has been brilliant in her openness, and that’s not so easy to do.”

The virtual meetings with Berro helped her realize that she needed to broaden her mindset and not just look toward the next year or two, but prepare for what Aluma was to be in 10 years from now as an essential part of the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the State of Israel, she said. It also helped her see Jews in the United States as important partners who want to be a part of Aluma’s vision and mission, through fundraising. His questions about what hope she had significantly prompted her to look further into the future, she said.

“The 55,000 young people in the periphery we work with will lead the country in another 10 years. They will be the most important workforce in the country in another 10 years. It was really eye-opening, and like a breath of fresh air, since before we were really only busy thinking about how we were going to get through the day. [After my conversations with Neil] suddenly I saw that it would be OK. We could start thinking about where Israel’s young people would be in another 10 years, what is the role of Aluma in this and what are we doing today to get there.”

As a result of their conversations she began working with her 30 managers to build up their vision for Aluma in another 10 years and created the necessary work plans to get there, she said.

“The process was really rich. You can see in Aluma’s new work plans [a] description of everything that will happen in 10 years and what we’re doing this year to get there. That’s how we skipped the uncertainty of the coming year. We have confidence. Our work plans are for the coming year, but they will last for the other 10 years,” she said.