



## Jewish Leadership by Design? Prospects and Challenges

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Like many of you, I'm sure, I've become familiar with design thinking over the last several years – both the theory and the practice. Design thinking is often associated with the design firm IDEO and with the d.school at Stanford, and it has a distinctly Silicon Valley vibe. Design thinking is understood to be an approach to innovation or change, to creating something new to meet certain needs or solve certain problems. Design thinking is often said to be “human-centered,” which is to say, it prioritizes the human beings whose problems it comes to solve. The criterion of success is whether the innovation solves those problems, for those human beings, rather than whether it meets some other pre-determined standard for what a solution is supposed to look like or what a tool is supposed to do.

In other words, design thinking is deeply pragmatic, in both the popular sense of the term and the philosophical sense. It has a kind of agnosticism about big metaphysical ideas. It's in search of what works.

Moreover, design thinking emphasizes creativity and intuition over rationality and analysis. This does not mean that design thinking ignores empirical realities. Quite the contrary. Typically, a design-thinking approach will begin with data collection, and will emphasize how important it is to understand the presenting problem clearly and precisely in order to develop appropriate solutions. But design thinking also recognizes that good ideas often flow from messy, unwieldy processes, and that we need to create spaces for those unwieldy processes if we want to generate new solutions.

So what would it mean to focus on design thinking within the framework of leadership education? That's what I mean to signal by my title, “Jewish leadership by design.”

But first, we might wonder why this might be worth doing. What does a Silicon Valley idea that informs entrepreneurial processes have to do with the cultivation of talent for the professional and lay leadership of the Jewish community?

Let me spell out the argument. Design thinking is not just a matter of creating a widget, a better can opener or a better wallet or a better app. We can think about design thinking more broadly as an approach to organizational change. And for its advocates, not just *an* approach but a *good* one, a healthy and constructive one. If we are willing to accept the idea that leaders must facilitate positive change to meet new needs, then design thinking is a way to approach that mandate. Good leaders, then, strong leaders, are people who are equipped to lead design processes within their organization.

Let's set aside for the moment what exactly it means to be "equipped" in this way, what the specific capacities or dispositions of leaders of design processes might be. If we want organizations to change through design processes, then leaders need to be able to lead those processes. From this claim, it's only one step further to think about leadership education. Leadership education, in this conception, is the effort to cultivate or promote those capacities, in present or future leaders, that enable them to lead design processes within their organizations.

So far, so good. We've got a conception of leadership, and thus a conception of leadership education. And that conception of leadership is compelling, it seems to me, for the following three reasons.

First, it's non-technical. It's not about training people in technical skills, but rather, about cultivating capacities or dispositions that are decidedly non-technical: the ability to listen and observe carefully, in order to understand a problem fully; the capacity to generate creative ideas in non-judgmental fashion; the emotional disposition to know when to accelerate a design process and when to slow it down. These may be hard to cultivate, harder than technical skills. But that's exactly what makes them so desirable.

Second, this way of thinking about leadership is compelling for the same reason that design thinking itself is compelling, namely, that it's solution-oriented and client-focused. We want our leaders to be positive people, focused on solutions rather than merely on problems. We want them to be flexible and open-minded, more concerned about meeting the felt needs of human beings than about the correctness of their orthodoxies. We want our leaders to be focused on what works, to be pragmatists rather than metaphysicians.

And third, this conception of leadership is compelling because it celebrates creativity over rationality. We want our CFO to be a model of rational analysis. But our CEO? Well, we want that person to be interested in the data – but that's not enough. We want more from that person. We need a visionary, a creative thinker, someone who can do more than just come up with a better delivery system but instead, someone who can imagine a whole new framework. The CFO needs to follow the rules and make sure the information is correct. The CEO needs to tell us the story of ourselves. That capacity, that ability to tell us our story, has to be rooted in the facts, but it should never be limited to the facts. It has to inspire, ignite a spark in our own imagination. That's why it requires the leader's creativity, to imagine possibilities that are not currently obvious.

Those are three strengths of the model, three ways that we might think about leadership education

as an education for design thinking: (a) cultivating capacities or dispositions rather than technical skills; (b) focusing on the pragmatic rather than the metaphysical; and (c) emphasizing creativity alongside rationality.

This is all helpful to us, as we think about what we want leaders to be and to do. But there are also grounds for critique, and I believe that those critiques will help us think about leadership education just as the positive attributes have. Let me name three of them (just to keep things fair and balanced).

First, we noted that advocates for design-thinking often emphasize its positive orientation, its focus on solutions rather than problems. This is surely a good thing. But at the risk of stating the obvious, you cannot have a solution unless you first have identified a problem to be solved. In other words, those who embrace design thinking refuse to get locked into a negative discourse around problems, and instead find ways to pivot to a positive discourse that generates possible solutions to those problems. But this still assumes that what we see, when we look out at the world, is a field of problems.

I should note that this assumption—the assumption that the responsible thing to do, when looking at the world, is to identify the problems so that we can find the solutions—is not unique to design thinking. It is also closely associated with strategic philanthropy, the movement in the last decade or so, within philanthropy, away from reactive responses to requests for aid and towards a pro-active articulation of problems in order to develop strategic approaches to solving them.

There are good reasons to adopt a strategic philanthropic position, just as there are good reasons to adopt a design-thinking approach. But in education we know well that there is also a danger here. There is a danger in thinking about children in terms of problems to be solved, as drop-outs or children-at-risk. And the danger doesn't go away just by focusing positively on the solution rather than negatively on the problem. No child, no adult learner, no participant in any educational program, wants to be “solved,” any more than they want to be pathologized in the first place. (This is good relationship advice too!) When I look out at my classroom, I don't see problems sitting in front of me, and I'm not trying to solve anything.

This is not to say that there are no problems in educational spaces, of course. Sometimes it is genuinely helpful to articulate a problem in order to work on a solution. But we have to remember the old adage that if all you have is a hammer, then everything looks like a nail. We at least have to acknowledge the possibility that “solutions” are our hammer and “problems” are our nails. There are problems in education, and we ought to work on solutions. But the business of education, we might say, is not about solving problems.

The business of Jewish education, likewise, is not about solving the problems of Jews. It's about building a thriving Jewish community, creating an aspirational shared Jewish future, helping people lead good and meaningful lives. To reiterate, this point is not about optimism versus pessimism. I'm not suggesting that we ignore the challenges. But we ought to notice the danger of pathologizing Jews and Jewish communities, simply because we're locking into a mindset that says that we need to figure out the problems precisely so that we can be solution-oriented.

The second critique focuses on the ways in which design thinking is action-oriented. The design-thinking approach says, “Don't just stand there, do something!” Try something. Adopt an experimental approach. Don't be afraid to fail, and fail fast, and fail often. You'll learn more from

trying than you will from sitting on your hands while you worry about what to do. The claim is that leaders who are eager to try and fail, and who promote that attitude within their organizations, will be more successful than those who are focused on maintaining the status quo.

There is surely something valuable here. Very often, we *do* want action, experimentation, learning from experience rather than waiting for the perfect solution to magically appear. But not always. Sometimes, the right counsel is, “Don’t just do something, stand there.” Sometimes, we do not yet understand the situation correctly, we do not yet have enough information, and we have not yet figured out the right way of framing the problem. Sometimes, we need to let our current practice develop, we need to let it bake for a while, before moving on to the next thing. Sometimes, doing something—anything—because of this kind of action-orientation may well have a hidden cost down the road, in terms of institutional exhaustion and dissipation of focus.

In schools, for example, we sometimes see a frenetic embrace of every passing fad. Let’s try it out! Let’s see what happens! Why not? But when cooler heads prevail, we realize that the teachers are exhausted and do not have the time to learn from experiment A before we’ve moved on to B and C. In other kinds of non-profit organizations in the Jewish world, we sometimes see an expectation that every new grant requires a brand-new initiative, a new innovation. To use a technical term, this is crazy—and crazy-making. We take our best and most thoughtful practitioners and we turn them into hamsters on the wheel of innovation.

In these situations, we ought to be cultivating leadership not for action-orientation but for sustained focus, sobriety, maturity, the ability to stay the course and invest for the long term even when there is pressure to try something new, to fail fast, to show quick results. When we read the design-thinking literature, we should notice that data collection in that literature is typically a matter of a quick-and-dirty exploration of the needs of a particular target audience. Sometimes, that’s exactly the right approach. At other times, though, what we need is a slow-baking process of institutional learning, or of developing an intellectual infrastructure, over the course of several years.

As we think about the education of the leadership that we want for the Jewish community, we ought to keep in mind leadership for slow-baking, not just leadership for failing fast.

Third and finally, I noted that design thinking is admirably attentive to the needs of human beings. The criterion of success for the product that is being designed is not elegance or efficiency or how many extra features it has, but whether it works for the person for whom it was designed. The criterion of success for any solution is whether it solves the problem that the client is facing.

But in non-profit leadership, who exactly is the client? Sometimes, in direct service organizations, we can think about the clients as the people who are being directly served. If I’m working on homelessness, the client is the homeless population. I’ve got to keep their needs front and center. Many educational organizations are like this as well, at least in certain respects.

But what if I’m building an art museum? Or strengthening democracy? Or doing basic biological research? Then the client is not so clear.

RAVSAK used to have a tag line, “Our client is the Jewish future.” It was cute, but it was also instructive. By adopting that tag line, Marc Kramer and his colleagues were declaring their independence from short-term thinking. They were saying that they did not want to view their relationships with the Jewish day school sector in transactional terms, simply providing services for

schools whom they regarded as their clients. They were thinking bigger than that. They were focused on a longer-term horizon. Of course, it was *also* necessary to listen carefully to the schools in the RAVSAK network, to understand their needs. But if they *only* listened to the schools, only provided what the schools said they needed, they would not have been fulfilling their mission.

I've been suggesting all along that design thinking is pragmatic, so let me close with a word about pragmatism of the philosophical kind. Philosophical pragmatism held the belief, roughly, that we ought to focus on what works, whatever is "expedient"—that was the term that was sometimes used—rather than focusing on some other set of criteria for what is true. But in one location, in one of my favorite passages, William James writes (in *The Meaning of Truth*, 1909, p. 222) as follows:

The true [is] the expedient in the way of our thinking... Expedient in the long run and on the whole, of course, for what meets expediently all the experience in sight won't necessarily meet all farther experiences equally satisfactorily.

So he does not just mean expediency here and now, whatever works for me in the moment. You have to think about expediency in the long run and on the whole.

This clarification, expanding one's horizon from what works right now to what works in the long run and on the whole, is incredibly significant. After all, we do not have all the data about the long run yet. We are inevitably in the situation of having to make judgments under conditions of uncertainty. We have to do our best to anticipate the changes that will come, indeed, to envision them before they arrive.

Leaders well-schooled in design thinking will be admirably attuned to the needs of real human beings, and will have the flexibility and creativity to develop new solutions rather than simply sticking with the status quo. But this is not enough for leadership. Something else is needed as well. Beyond facilitating the processes that generate solutions for present-day problems, leaders also have to have the capacity to think about the long-term, what James called the "long run." If they genuinely believe that their client is "the future," they have to make decisions in advance of knowing what the future will bring—indeed, decisions that will *create* one future among many possible futures.

We have a word for this capacity: we call it vision.