

Tzimtzum and Executive Leadership

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When the kabbalists of Safed advanced the spiritual theory of tzimtzum, I am pretty sure they were not thinking about the role of a founding CEO of a multimedia nonprofit leaving with his family for a kibbutz in the middle of the Arava desert.

On the face of it, heading any endeavor — Jewish or otherwise — requires being quite public, filling communal space and news columns. In 1995, when Sue Laden and I began Jewish Family & Life! (JFL), it was an act of creation and a leap of faith. We believed in new media to unleash the sparks of creativity within Jewish life and to reach Jews across the globe in new ways with inclusive and relevant models of Jewish life. There was certainly, at that time, a vacuum around mass outreach, new media, and a relevant Jewish family message. We filled that vacuum with a new vision, which was translated into funding proposals for foundations and reinforced by a creative, public image through books, articles, conferences, and appearances.

Jewish life abhors vacuums. The parallel rise of Jewish family foundations and the development of our own vision gave rise to dozens of new endeavors — from BabagaNewz, MyJewishLearning.com, InterfaithFamily.com, JVibe.com, birthrightisrael.com, JBooks.com, and others — as well as providing a new home for this journal. Over the years, a budget of \$150,000 grew to more than \$3 million. These were difficult yet exciting times; we were funded by foundations eager not only to do good for the Jewish people but also to brand themselves as part of the creative wave rejuvenating Jewish life. Branding and tzimtzum are diametrically opposite.

There were four kinds of tzimtzum that I, as CEO, had to demonstrate along the way, before the ultimate stepping back. These stepping-back actions were required for the enterprise to grow beyond my own abilities, networks, time, and ideas.

The first tzimtzum was to make room for staff members to own and operate their projects; rather than micromanaging, I offered constructive input wherever possible. This was a welcome development, and it worked when the staff was learning-agile, responsible, and creative. For example, the more I moved away from proposing article ideas for JVibe, the more the young editors and their advisory board of teenagers felt empowered.

The second tzimtzum was to make room for the board to define the work, role, and salary of a founder, as well as the budget of the organization. Foundations eager to move forward with JFL insisted on a more rigorous board role and culture. They got it. In the first years, I set my own modest salary. Afterward, I had to fight for it, which — though necessary — was always difficult.

The third tzimtzum, in 2000–2001, when the bubble burst, was to accept help from consultants who swooped in to quickly restructure the organization and the budget, and to clear a new path forward during challenging economic times. Hundreds of Jewish Web sites folded, nearly all our competitors disappeared, and we managed, through an intervention funded and staffed by supporters at Lippman Kanfer Family Foundation (chief funder of Sh'ma Institute, which publishes this journal), to reinforce our gains by reducing, yet again, the prerogatives of a creative CEO.

The fourth tzimtzum was actually the hardest; it made room for the direct input of funders into projects. The currency of the new wave of philanthropy introduced project partnership; rather than writing an annual check for general support, partners wanted to be involved in the actual projects. This was great when the partners truly had expertise; it sometimes backfired when a combination of passion and money was mistaken for expertise. The long list of projects that flourished was due to the right partners and a spirit of mutual respect; the short list of projects that imploded was caused by a tzimtzum mismatch: Either we could not make enough room for them or they could not relinquish enough control to let us do our job well.

After eleven years at the helm, I stepped back completely from the nonprofit. Though JFL was a family-friendly place to work, the rigors of being its CEO took a toll on family life. I didn't realize, until sometime later with my family living in the desert, how toxic the CEO role had been. The toxicity is related to always being on, always contending with not only the demands of leadership but also the pettiness that often plagues Jewish organizational life. I felt, often, more judged than respected, more undermined than supported, more beggar than social entrepreneur with a proven scorecard.

Stepping back was a necessity; therefore, I am not so sure it merits the status of tzimtzum. Luckily, the JFL board stepped up to the plate and chose a very qualified successor — essential to stepping back without regrets.

Lately, I have been asked how I felt when JFL closed its doors. My self-imposed exile just slightly predated the beginning of the worst financial crisis since the Depression. JFL's board and new CEO, Amir Cohen, successfully placed all the key properties with new homes, so the mission and vision live on. This is a very rewarding feeling.

I am also often asked if I prefer working in the for-profit sector. This is a topic of another essay. But I do know that the lessons my nonprofit board taught me about stepping back at each juncture are ones that I have, so far, successfully implemented in this new and evolving role.

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