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# BEIT MIDRASH: SETTING PRIORITIES

SUMMER INSTITUTE 2021

The *Beit Midrash*, the house of study, is a place where texts get their chance to speak and where their readers get a chance to respond. Like a traditional *beit midrash*, students will have the opportunity to engage with the text with learning partners, in *chevruta*, then come together for a session, a *shiur*, at the end.

**Setting Priorities Post(?) Covid: Learning from Chronic Illness and Uncertainty**

Madeline Cooper

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## Setting Priorities Post(?) Covid: Learning from Chronic Illness and Uncertainty Madeline Cooper, Class 31

### Text 1: B. Arakhin 16b

עד היכן תכלית יסורין אמר רבי אלעזר כל שארגו לו בגד ללבוש ואין מתקבל עליו מתקיף לה רבא זעירא ואיתימא רבי שמואל בר נחמני גדולה מזו אמרו אפילו נתכוונו למזוג בחמין ומזגו לו בצונן ומזגו לו בחמין ואת אמרת כולי האי מר בריה דרבינא אמר אפילו נהפך לו חלוקו רבא ואיתימא רב חסדא ואיתימא רבי יצחק ואמרי לה במתניתא תנא אפילו הושיט ידו לכיס ליטול שלש ועלו בידו שתיים דווקא שלש ועלו בידו שתיים אבל שתיים ועלו בידו שלש לא דליכא טירחא למישדייהו וכל כך למה דתניא דבי רבי ישמעאל כל שעברו עליו ארבעים יום בלא יסורין קיבל עולמו

What is the least amount of pain that is included in the definition of suffering? Rabbi Elazar says: Anyone for whom they wove a garment to wear and the garment does not suit him. Rava the Younger objects to this, and some say Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani objects: The Sages said an even greater statement than this: Even if people intended that they would dilute his wine with hot water, but they diluted it for him with cold water, it is considered suffering. If he wanted it diluted with cold water, but they diluted it for him with hot water, this too is considered suffering. And you say all this? Mar son of Ravina says: Even if one's cloak turns around as he puts it on, so that he has to take it off and put it on again. Rava said, and some say it was Rav Hisda, and some say it was Rabbi Yitzhak, and some say it was taught in a *baraita*: Even if one reached his hand into his pocket to take out three coins, but two coins came up in his hand. It constitutes suffering specifically in a case where one reached into his pocket to take three coins, and two coins came up in his hand. But if he reached into his pocket to take two, and instead three coins came up in his hand, this is not considered to be suffering, as it is not an exertion to drop the extra coin back into his pocket. And why is it so important to know the least amount of suffering? As the school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: Anyone who passes forty days without suffering has received his World and will have no further reward in the World-to-Come.

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### Text 2: Living a chronic life in a fix-it-now world (Kate Bowler, June 17, 2019)

I am sitting in my psychologist's office. He specializes in behavioral therapy...but I'm not sure how to behave anymore. Three summers ago, I wrote a memoir...a lasting gift to my young son after I was gone. I wanted to explain what it was like to try — and perhaps fail — to overcome my diagnosis of Stage 4 cancer in a culture that believes everything happens for a reason...I wanted my son to know how hard I had tried to live...but I was realizing that my expectations for my own future were based on a lie. Facing death at 35, I could no longer believe that the universe doles out what you deserve.

To my surprise, immunotherapy drugs and surgeries have been wonderfully effective. Cancer used to be a daily crisis of soaring highs and lows, but in the intervening years...it has become something different, something chronic. Some days, my doctors talk about my cancer like there is a narcoleptic murderer somewhere in my house who is not entirely sure whether to kill me or go back to sleep. Other days cancer seems like an annoying neighbor who makes a lot

of noise but who probably won't come over again. Cancer could kill me or leave me alone, so how afraid should I be?

I ask my therapist. "It's hard for me to know when to stop being afraid...being afraid helped keep me alive. I learned to read medical reports, doctor's expressions, clinical trial notifications. I learned to be extremely responsive in a complicated medical system because I was so afraid."

"It was wonderfully useful," he agrees. "But you can't stay in this state of extreme vigilance."

"What would you do if I were afraid of heights?" I wonder.

"Well, we might take you up on a roof and sit there until you relax. It's called exposure therapy."

"What if you took me up on the roof and it caved in *multiple times*?" I say, too loudly.

"It would take a lot longer," he laughs.

Life is full of surprises — both beautiful and tragic. But for those of us who have experienced the worst possible scenario, it feels like lunacy to forget the downside risks...I crave language to account for life lived alongside the fear that persists. So I sat down to talk with writer Jayson Greene, whose 2-year-old daughter was killed in a tragic accident. He and his wife, Stacy, made the courageous decision to love again, to have a second child, after knowing what it was like to lose a first. I asked Jayson how he learned to take risks when he knew the cost. The decision to have another child was "not a hard one," he said. "It felt soft. It was the realization that grief only proceeds out of love."

Speaking with Jayson made me realize that the locus of my greatest fears...could also be that daily nudge, asking me to stay as awake to my love as to my fear. To say, "I know the world is full of things to fear, but...we will learn to plod ahead even though love itself makes us terrified that we cannot be without each other." Our society finds it especially difficult to talk about anything chronic — meaning, any kind of pain, emotional or physical, that abides and lives with us constantly. The sustaining myth of the American Dream rests on a hearty can-do spirit, but not all problems can be overcome. So often, we are defined by the things we live with rather than the things we conquer. Any persistent suffering requires being afraid — but we hang our fears in the balance of our great loves and act, each day, as though love will outweigh them all. Life is chronic. Fear will always be present. I can only make those brave, soft choices to find my way forward when there is no way back.

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### Questions to consider:

1. What do these two texts have in common? Are there differences in their philosophy?
2. What strikes you about these texts? What speaks to you? What challenges you?
3. Do either of these texts speak to your own experiences of pain, fear, or suffering?

*Essential Questions to consider: How do we reconcile competing claims on our finite resources? What do we do when two values are in conflict with each other? How do we live a life that embodies what we prioritize?*

### Source 1 — Greg McKeown, "Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less" (2014)

The word priority came into the English language in the 1400s. It was singular. It meant the very first or prior thing. It stayed singular for the next five hundred years. Only in the 1900s did we pluralize the term and start talking about priorities. Illogically, we reasoned that by changing the word we could bend reality. Somehow we would now be able to have multiple “first” things. People and companies routinely try to do just that. One leader told me of this experience in a company that talked of “Pri-1, Pri-2, Pri-3, Pri-4, and Pri-5.” This gave the impression of many things being the priority but actually meant nothing was.

- What do you prioritize? Do you prioritize in the singular (*priority*) or in the plural (*priorities*)?
- How might a multiplicity of priorities obfuscate that which is essential? Given that there will always be ever-growing demands on our lives, how do we avoid this pitfall?

### Source 2a — What Is Core? (Bamidbar 32:16 - 25)

*[Before crossing the Jordan River into the Land of Israel, the tribes of Reuven and Gad petition Moses to let them remain east of the Jordan, outside of the Land, where there is more fertile pasture for their livestock. Moses strikes a bargain with the Reuven and Gad - they will lead the conquest of the Land, and then return to their homes east of the Jordan. ]*

(16) Then they stepped up to him and said, **“Pens for our flocks shall we build here for our livestock, and towns for our children.** (17) And we shall arm ourselves swiftly in the vanguard of the Israelites until we have established them in their home, while our small children stay in the fortified towns because of the inhabitants of the land. (18) We will not return to our homes until every one of the Israelites is in possession of his portion. (19) But we will not have a share with them in the territory beyond the Jordan, for we have received our share on the east side of the Jordan.” (24) *[Moshe:]* **“Build towns for your children and sheepfolds for your flocks,** but do what you have promised.” (25) The tribes of Gad and Reuben answered Moshe, “Your servants will do as my lord commands. (26) **Our small children, our wives, our flocks, and all our other livestock will stay behind in the towns of Gilead;** (27) while your servants, all those recruited for war, cross over, at the instance of *Hashem*, to engage in battle—as my lord orders.”

### Source 2b — Rashi (11th cent. France) on Bamidbar 32:16:1

“WE WILL BUILD [PENS] FOR OUR FLOCK HERE” — They paid more regard to their property than to their sons and daughters, because they mentioned their cattle before their children. Moshe said to them, “Not so! **Make the chief thing the chief thing and what is subordinate subordinate.** First build cities for your little ones and afterwards enclosures for your flocks” (cf. v. 24) (Midrash Tanchuma, Matot 7).

- How do the tribes of Reuven & Gad inadvertently reveal their priorities? How does Moses recalibrate them?
- How can we determine someone's priorities - by their actions, or by their words?
- How do you determine what is primary and what is secondary? What happens when you mix them up?

### Source 3 — Empowering Others: A Mirror of Our Own Priorities (Shemot 18:14 - 22)

*[Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, sees Moshe settling disputes among the Israelites from morning to night, and suggests a better approach to governance - delegating authority and responsibility.]*

(14) But when Moshe's father-in-law saw how much he had to do for the people, he said, “What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning until evening?” (15) Moshe replied to his father-in-law, “It is because the people come to me to inquire of G-d. (16) When they have a dispute, it comes before me, and I decide between one person and another, and I make known the laws and teachings of G-d.” (17) **But Moshe's father-in-law said to him, “The thing you are doing is not right; (18) you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone.** (19) Now listen to me. I will give

you counsel, and G-d be with you! You represent the people before G-d: you bring the disputes before G-d, (20) and enjoin upon them the laws and the teachings, and make known to them the way they are to go and the practices they are to follow. (21) You shall also seek out from among all the people: **valorous men, G-d-fearing people, men of truth, who despise ill-gotten gains**. Set these over them as **leaders** of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, (22) and let them judge the people at all times. Have them bring every major dispute to you, but let them decide every minor dispute themselves. **Make it easier for yourself by letting them share the burden with you.**

- If Moses' original plan is ultimately unsustainable, how does Yitro's advice seek to resolve the competing priorities that Moses feels duty-bound to uphold?
- There is work that needs to get done, and there is work that needs to get done by YOU. How do you determine which is which? How can both be accomplished? How do the people you empower reflect your own priorities?

#### **Source 4 – Competing Priorities: *Pikuach Nefesh* (Bava Metzia 62a)**

The Gemara asks: And Rabbi Yoḥanan, what does he do with this verse: “And your brother shall live with you”? The Gemara answers: He requires the verse for that which is taught in a *baraita*: If two people were walking on a desolate path and there was a jug of water in the possession of one of them, and the situation was such that if both drink from the jug, both will die, as there is not enough water, but if only one of them drinks, he will reach a settled area, there is a dispute as to the law. Ben Petora taught: It is preferable that both of them drink and die, and let neither one of them see the death of the other. This was the accepted opinion until Rabbi Akiva came and taught that the verse states: “And your brother shall live with you,” indicating that your life takes precedence over the life of the other.

- How does this source frame the ethical dilemma of rationing scarce resources?
- Which position feels right to you - that of Rabbi Petora or Rabbi Akiva? Why? Can you make a convincing argument for the other side as well?

#### **Source 5 – Mishneh Torah: Gifts to the Poor 7:13 (Maimonides, 12th cent. Spain/Egypt)**

[Regarding charity,] a poor person who is a relative takes precedence over anyone else. The poor of one's household take precedence over the poor of one's city. The poor of one's city take precedence over the poor of another city, as it is said, (Deut. 15:11) *Open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land.*

- Do you agree with this hierarchy with regard to charitable giving? Why or why not?
- Should we prioritize need or proximity? What are the benefits of focusing on where the need is most acute, and what are the benefits of focusing on where we have the most agency and authenticity?

#### **Source 6 – Learning or Doing? (Kiddushin 40b)**

Rabbi Tarfon and some elders were reclining in an upper chamber in the house of Nitza in Lod when this question came up: Which is greater, study or action? Rabbi Tarfon spoke up and said: Action is greater. Rabbi Akiva spoke up and said: Study is greater. The others then spoke up and said: Study is greater because it leads to action.

- Do you agree with Rabbi Tarfon or Rabbi Akiva? Why?
- Our most precious and finite resource is time. Given the limitations on your time, how do you determine what proportion of your time to allocate to learning and/or to doing?

#### **Source 7 – *Ein Kemach, Ein Torah* (Pirkei Avot 3:21)**

Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah said: If there is no Torah, there is no right conduct [*derekh eretz*]. If there is no right conduct, there is no Torah. If there is no wisdom [*chochma*], there is no fear/awe of G-d. If there is no fear/awe of G-d, there is no wisdom. If there is no contemplation [*bina*], there is no application [*da'at*]; where there is no application, there is no contemplation. Where there is no sustenance [lit. flour], there is no Torah; where there is no Torah, there is no sustenance.

- How can our various needs complement and support each other in a positive feedback loop? Can we ever separate them out one from another, or are they inextricably linked?
- What does this source teach us about priorities and harmonizing the inherent tensions therein?

## A Tale of Two Challahs

Joshua Jacobs, 32

Deuteronomy 10:12

וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ שָׂאֵל מֵעַמְּךָ כִּי אִם-לִירְאָה אֶת-ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְלַקֵּחַ בְּכָל-דַּרְכָּיו וּלְאַהֲבָהוּ אֹתוֹ וְלַעֲבֹד אֶת-ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ

And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God demand of you? Only this: to revere the LORD your God, to walk only in His paths, to love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and soul

### Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think God prioritizes these values? Is there a hierarchy to their order?
2. If we look at this as a list of life's big priorities, is anything missing from it?

Iturei Torah, Commentary on Deut. 10:12

כי אם ליראה... מספרים שפעם שיבח ר' ישראל סלנטר את תלמידו ר' שמחה זיסל מקלם שהוא אדם שלם ובעל מידות תרומיות, וקרא עליו 'כולך יפה רעיתי ומום אין בך'. רב אחד ששמע הדברים אמר: אמנם צדיק תמים הוא ר' שמחה זיסל, אך אילו היה מתמסר לש"ס ופוסקים היה נעשה לגדול בישראל. אמר לו ר' ישראל סלנטר: הלכה הוא, כשלפניך חלה גדולה ופרוסה – וחלה קטנה ושלימה, מברכים על השלימה. משמע ששלימות ותמימות חשובים מגדלות.

**"Only this: to revere..."** - They tell the story that once, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter praised one of his students, Rabbi Simcha Zissel from Kelm, saying that he was a whole person (Heb: "shalem") and master of noble traits, and reciting about him "All of you is fair, my companion, and there is no blemish in you" (Song of Songs 4:7). Another rabbi, who heard these words, said, "Perhaps this Rabbi Simcha Zissel is a perfect tzadik, but if he had [truly] devoted himself to Talmud and *poskim* (legal decisors), he would have been made a great one in Israel." Rabbi Israel Salanter said to him, "The *halakha* is that when there is before you a big challah that is split [in pieces] - and a small challah that is whole, we bless on the whole one. Meaning, fullness and uprightness is more important than greatness.

### Discussion Questions

1. Would you rather be the "big challah" or the "small challah?"
2. What do we sacrifice when we pursue greatness? What do we sacrifice when we pursue wholeness?

### Kedushat Levi on Noah

למה לא היה מתפלל נח לבטל הגזירה (...) יש צדיק אחד שעובד הבורא ברוך הוא והוא שפל בעיני עצמו מאוד ומאוד וחושב בלבו מי אני שאתפלל לבטל הגזירה לכן אינו מתפלל לבטל (...) ונח הגם שהיה צדיק גדול ותמים היה קטן בעיניו מאוד ולא היה לו אמונה בעצמו שהוא צדיק מושל ויכול לבטל הגזירה אדרבה היה חשוב בעיניו כשאר הדור והיה חושב אם אני אהיה ניצול בתיבה ואני אין צדיק יותר משאר הדור המה גם כן ינצלו לכן לא היה מתפלל על הדור.

"Why didn't Noah pray to avert the decree?... Because, there is a certain type of tzaddik who serves the Creator, but is meek and worthless in his own eyes, and he thinks, from the depths of his heart: 'Who am I to pray that a decree be averted?' So, he doesn't even pray to avert the decree. And Noah, even though he was righteous and whole-hearted (Gen 6:10), he was tiny and insignificant in his own eyes. He didn't believe in himself, that he was a powerful tzaddik and he could actually avert the decree against the people. On the contrary, he saw himself just like everyone else in his generation, so he told himself: 'I am no better than anyone else in my generation, so if I am going to be saved, so too will they.' As a result, he did nothing to fight to avert the decree against them."

### **Discussion Questions**

1. In contrast to the Iturei Torah commentary, what value does *this* text prioritize?
2. What's the danger of a "small, yet whole" life?

### Mira Fox, *The Forward*

"It's dismaying that, 25 years after Strug sacrificed her career for a vault her team turned out not to need, so many are heralding that action as emblematic of national pride, not asking what kind of national pride demands that athletes permanently sacrifice their health for the nationalistic glory of their home countries."

### Simone Biles, G.O.A.T.

"So it's OK sometimes to even sit out the big competitions to focus on yourself, because it shows how strong of a competitor and person that you really are, rather than just battle through it."

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Is this a tale of two challahs?



## Your bath or my laundry? An exploration on rationing scarce resources

Sarah Pollack, Class 33

Wexner Summer Institute 2021 | Stowe, VT

### Rabbi Jonathan Sacks – The Dignity of Difference

David Hume noted that our sense of empathy diminishes as we move outward from the members of our family to our neighbors, our society and the world. Traditionally, our sense of involvement with the fate of others has been in inverse proportion to the distance separating us and them. What has changed is that television and the internet have effectively abolished distance. They have brought images of suffering in far-off lands into our immediate experience. Our sense of compassion for the victims of poverty, war and famine, runs ahead of our capacity to act. Our moral sense is simultaneously activated and frustrated. We feel that something should be done, but what, how and by whom? (p. 30)

### Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 71a

Rav Yosef taught: The verse states: “If you lend money to any of My people, even to the poor person who is with you” (Exodus 22:24). The term “My people” teaches that if one of My people, i.e., a Jew, and a gentile both come to borrow money from you, My people take precedence. The term “the poor person” teaches that if a poor person and a rich person come to borrow money, the poor person takes precedence. And from the term: “Who is with you,” it is derived: If your poor person, meaning one of your relatives, and one of the poor of your city come to borrow money, your poor person takes precedence. If it is between one of the poor of your city and one of the poor of another city, the one of the poor of your city takes precedence.

דתני רב יוסף \*שמות כב כד\* אם כסף תלוה  
את עמי את העני עמך עמי ונכרי עמי קודם  
עני ועשיר עני קודם ענייך ועניי עירך ענייך  
קודמין עניי עירך ועניי עיר אחרת עניי עירך  
קודמין

#### Question:

The text lays out four binaries of people seeking economic aid. What are the four categories? Which does the text privilege? What does the text omit in regards to these binaries? (i.e. How does the text suggest that one decide between a Jewish out-of-towner and a neighbor of another faith?)

### Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 62a

It is taught in a baraita: If two people were walking on a desolate path and there was a jug [kiton] of water in the possession of one of them, and the situation was such that if both drink from the jug, both will die, as there is not enough water, but if only one of them drinks, he will reach a settled area, there is a dispute as to the halakha. Ben Petora taught: It is preferable that both of them drink and die, and let neither one of them see the death of the other. This was the accepted opinion until Rabbi Akiva came and taught that the verse states: “And your brother shall live with you,” indicating that your life takes precedence over the life of the other.

דתניא שנים שהיו מהלכין בדרך וביד אחד מהן  
קיתון של מים אם שותין שניהם מתים ואם שותה  
אחד מהן מגיע לשוב דרש בן פטורה מוטב שישתו  
שניהם וימותו ואל יראה אחד מהם במיתתו של  
חבירו עד שבא ר' עקיבא ולימד וחי אחיך עמך  
חייך קודמים לחיי חבירך

## Your bath or my laundry? An exploration on rationing scarce resources

Sarah Pollack, Class 33

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### Action:

Talk with your chevuta/ot to clarify the full circumstances of this case. Imagine all of the possible variables (what if...) How could these variables shift the conclusions? Apply those variables and scenarios to the conclusions of the following passage.

### Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 80b-81a

The Gemara raises a contradiction between this statement of Rabbi Yosei and another statement of Rabbi Yosei. It was taught in a baraita: In the case of a spring belonging to the residents of a city, if the water was needed for their own lives, i.e., the city's residents required the spring for drinking water, and it was also needed for the lives of others, their own lives take precedence over the lives of others. Likewise, if the water was needed for their own animals and also for the animals of others, their own animals take precedence over the animals of others. And if the water was needed for their own laundry and also for the laundry of others, their own laundry takes precedence over the laundry of others. However, if the spring water was needed for the lives of others and their own laundry, the lives of others take precedence over their own laundry.

Rabbi Yosei disagrees and says: Even their own laundry takes precedence over the lives of others, as the wearing of unlaundered clothes can eventually cause suffering and pose a danger. The Gemara clarifies the difficulty presented by this *baraita*: Now, if with regard to laundry, Rabbi Yosei said that refraining from laundering one's clothes involves pain and affliction, is it not all the more so the case that if one does not bathe, which affects the entire body, Rabbi Yosei would agree that he will suffer pain? The Gemara refutes this argument: The Sages say in response: Yes, the pain of refraining from laundering one's clothes is stronger, according to Rabbi Yosei, than the pain of not washing one's body. As Shmuel said: Grime on one's head leads to blindness, and grime on one's clothes leads to madness, whereas grime on one's body leads to boils and sores, which are less serious than madness and blindness. Based on this it may be suggested that according to Rabbi Yosei, soiled clothing presents a greater danger than an unwashed body.

וְרַמִּי דְרַבִּי יוֹסֵי אֲדַרְבֵּי יוֹסֵי: מֵעַיִן שֶׁל בְּנֵי הָעִיר  
תַּיִתְּהוּ וְתַיִי אֲחֵרִים — תַּיִתְּהוּ קוֹדֵמִין לְתַיִי אֲחֵרִים,  
בְּהֶמְתָּם [וּבְהֶמְתָּ אֲחֵרִים בְּהֶמְתָּם] קוֹדֵמֶת לְבְּהֶמְתָּ  
אֲחֵרִים, כְּבִיסָתְךָ וְכְבִיסַת אֲחֵרִים כְּבִיסָתְךָ —  
קוֹדֵמֶת לְכְבִיסַת אֲחֵרִים, תַּיִי אֲחֵרִים וְכְבִיסָתְךָ תַּיִי  
אֲחֵרִים — קוֹדֵמִין לְכְבִיסָתְךָ.

רַבִּי יוֹסֵי אוֹמֵר: כְּבִיסָתְךָ קוֹדֵמֶת לְתַיִי אֲחֵרִים;  
הַשְׂתָּא כְּבִיסָה. אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹסֵי: יֵשׁ בָּהּ צָעַר, גּוּף  
כּוֹלֵוֹ לֹא כֹל שָׁכֵן!  
אָמַר: אֵין, כְּבִיסָה אֵלִימָא לְרַבִּי יוֹסֵי, דְאָמַר  
שְׂמוּאֵל: הָאֵי עַרְבוּבִיתָא דְרִישָׁא מְתִיא לִידֵי  
עוּרָא עַרְבוּבִיתָא דְמַאנִי מְתִיא לִידֵי שְׂעֻמוּבִיתָא



# THE WEXNER FOUNDATION

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## THE WEXNER FOUNDATION

The Wexner Foundation trains and inspires leaders in the North American Jewish Community and the State of Israel. Through diverse, cohort-based educational programs, the Foundation invests in promising professionals and volunteers and gives them tools to exercise transformative leadership. Working in partnership with other foundations, philanthropists and communities, the Foundation strengthens North American Jewish life and Israel's public sector by making their leaders more skilled, visionary and collaborative.

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