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## Women CEOs move Jewish groups forward

by Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi

Special to WJW

While Golda Meir became Israel's prime minister in 1969, American Jewish women still lagged behind their Israeli counterparts in taking the reins of Jewish communal leadership.

However, Jewish women from the Washington/Baltimore corridor have been leading game-changers on this slow-moving front. In 1991, Shoshana Cardin of Baltimore broke the glass ceiling when she became the first female chair of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. Since then, women have been doing a lot more than just changing the face of Jewish institutions - they are leading them.

Today more than 40 women are CEOs of vital Jewish organizations across America. Locally Carole R. Zawatsky is the third female CEO in a row to lead the District of Columbia Jewish Community Center. Her predecessors were Arna Meyer-Mickelson and Jill Moskowitz. Mickelson recently retired after 25 years of building the DCJCC from a tiny operation in a townhouse to the powerhouse institution that it is today with more than 150 employees serving thousands of Washington residents. Zawatsky is now armed to take it to the next level.

Vivian Bass, a local legend and globally recognized leader, is CEO of the Jewish Foundation for Group Homes. She is one of the most successful CEOs in the nonprofit and disability sectors.

Rachel Garbow Monroe, president of the Baltimore-headquartered Weinberg Foundation, is of the few CEOs with an MBA. She leads an organization with approximately \$2.1 billion in assets that distributes roughly \$100 million in grants each year. Monroe, an energetic champion for those in need, is also a major cheerleader of others in the field.

Monroe tells the story of a colleague who retired a long time ago who gave her a sign that reads, "I am woman. I am invincible. I am tired." Still, she takes the time to mentor people both inside and outside of the Weinberg Foundation. Each year, with her inspiration, the foundation hosts a "not to be missed" event with top leaders and more than 900 people from both Jewish life and human services. A role model for balancing work and family, she, her parents, her husband and children attend the annual event and warmly greet guests.

Now, dozens of CEOs have formed an informal group and are now networking with each other to help reinforce positive trends and tools. The group came from an idea that I had in conversation with Shula Bahat who leads Beit Hatfutsot of America. The initial roster of women was put together by my then executive assistant,

Christianna Sergent. Since I left The Israel Project, a major force behind the women CEOs networking has been Rabbi Julie Schoenfeld, executive vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly.

The informal group has hosted gatherings to focus specifically on issues regarding the role of a CEO. The conversations so far have focused on strategic planning, performance metrics, board relations and other issues unique to leaders of nonprofit organizations. As a co-instigator of these interactions, in the past week I interviewed 15 of these dynamic CEOs. Steeped in a commitment to cause, they are grounded in their Jewish identities, experienced in fighting for social justice and security issues, and each day do serious work to make the world a better place.

The group is extremely diverse. Nancy Kaufman of National Council of Jewish Women, Marilyn Sneiderman of Avodah, Ann Toback of Workmen's Circle, Lori Weinstein of Jewish Women International and others come from liberal advocacy organizations. Andrea Levin of CAMERA, Roz Rothstein of StandWithUs and Amy Holtz of JerusalemOnlineU, focus on Israel and security issues. Abby J. Leibman leads the fast-growing MAZON and many other female Jewish CEOs offer direct assistance to those in need. Brenda Gevertz, executive director of the Jewish Communal Service Association of North America, works to help Jewish professionals across sectors.

Overall, despite the fact that these women are almost all paid less than their male counterparts in the field, they personally feel they face little gender discrimination today. Additionally, despite a very tough economy, every single one of them predicts that their organization will have a larger staff and budget in the years ahead.

Shifra Bronznick, founder and president of Advancing Women Professionals & the Jewish Community, has been a key catalyst for bringing women executives forward. She points out, "Increasingly, women are taking the lead in every sphere - from major foundations to Jewish social justice organizations, from social service agencies to new spiritual communities. Our most prestigious publications, The Forward, Tablet, Moment and Sh'ma, have women editor-in-chiefs. More than half of the organizations named by Slingshot as the most innovative and effective in Jewish life are headed by women. There are even several women at the helm of large city Federations. There is a growing influence from these women and their male colleagues that supports creative thinking about shared leadership models and healthy work practices."

The first gathering of the women CEOs was hosted by the intelligent and attractive Gail A. Magaliff, who comes off as a combination of a TV anchorwoman and a U.S. Secretary of State. Magaliff is the CEO of FECS Health and Human Services System, which is the largest Jewish organization headed by a woman. FECS has an

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and human services system, which is the largest Jewish organization headed by a woman. FECS has an operating budget of \$265 million which includes 10 operating divisions, 13 subsidiary corporations and some 15 mergers/receiverships. More than \$100 million of FECS' funding comes from the government, and millions additionally come from service fees for some of its programs. It provides vital employment training and human services to some 100,000 individuals a year, 10,000 each day throughout the metropolitan New York area.

At the request of the other CEOs, the second gathering of women CEOs was hosted by Ruth Messinger of the American Jewish World Service. She and a key member of her senior management team shared a case study of the success of AJWS. Messinger says "I love most aspects of my job - managing staff, interacting with the board, doing strategic development, presenting our work to congregations and donors, working with colleagues in other organizations, and - best of all - seeing the work we make possible on the ground." Like many of the other CEOs, she cites fundraising as the hardest part of her job. She is widely respected not only for the services AJWS delivers to those in need, but also for the way she treats her staff, the majority of whom happen to be women.

Still, as Maryland's Terry Meyerhoff Rubenstein, who recently retired from a major leadership post and continues to be a pioneer in mentoring women leaders points out, "In the Jewish world, its mostly women who do the work; still the majority of senior positions are held by men. Women have to work harder, smarter and more strategically for recognition and promotion. In general, women still aren't paid as well as men in our fields, and they need to be much more conscious of this issue."

Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi recently "retired" from a decade as CEO of The Israel Project. She is the Founder & President of www.laszlostrategies.com. To send her a comment, email her at jlm@laszlostrategies.com.

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